



DEMON SLAYER

KIMETSU NO YAIBA

SIGNS FROM
THE WIND

Novel by
AYA YAJIMA

Original Concept by
KOYOHARU GOTOUGE





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VIZ MEDIA

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DEMON SLAYER: KIMETSU NO YAIBA—

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Novel by

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CHARACTERS



TANJIRO
KAMADO

A kind boy who saved his sister and now aims to avenge his family. He can smell the scent of demons and an opponent's weakness.



NEZUKO
KAMADO

Tanjiro's younger sister. A demon attacked her and turned her into a demon. But unlike other demons, she fights her urges and tries to protect Tanjiro.



ZENITSU
AGATSUMA

He went through Final Selection at the same time as Tanjiro. He's usually cowardly, but when he falls asleep, his true power comes out.



INOSUKE
HASHIBIRA

He also went through Final Selection at the same time as Tanjiro. He wears the pelt of a wild boar and is very belligerent.



SANEMI
SHINAZUGAWA

Wind Hashira in the Demon Slayer Corps. He has a harsh attitude toward his younger brother Genya.



MASACHIKA
KUMENO

A Demon Slayer who uses Wind Breathing. He introduced Sanemi to the Demon Slayer Corps.



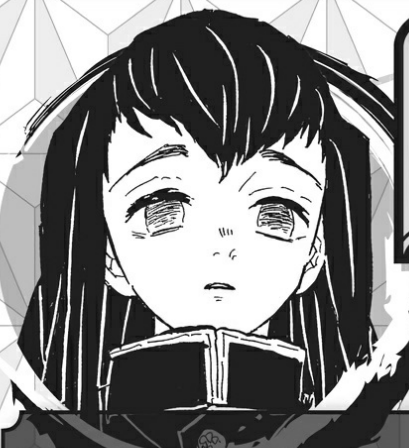
KANAO
TSUYURI

Successor to Shinobu, the Insect Hashira. She doesn't talk much and has difficulty making any kind of decision by herself.



HOTARU
HAGANEZUKA

The swordsmith who makes Tanjiro's katana. He has the soul of an artist, so he gets angry when a katana is treated poorly.



MUICHIRO
TOKITO

Mist Hashira in the Demon Slayer Corps. He's the descendant of users of Sun Breathing, the first breathing technique.



KOTETSU

A boy from the village of swordsmiths. He aids Tanjiro's training using the clockwork automaton Yoriichi Type Zero.



Chapter 1
**SIGNS FROM
THE WIND**

“Hey, are you okay?” said the boy with the sword. “Don’t worry. I got the demon’s head. Your arm’s really bleeding, though. Here, apply pressure above the wound.” With his free hand, he tossed Sanemi a clean handkerchief.

Sanemi looked the boy over suspiciously. Likely one or two years his senior, the boy wore some kind of stiff-collared military uniform. Two old scars burned beneath his left eye.

Sanemi tried to collect himself. “Do demons die when you cut off their head?”

“You’re out here demon hunting and you don’t know that much? You’re lucky you’re still alive.” The boy wiped the blood from his sword before returning it to its sheath. He squatted next to Sanemi.

“That blood’s not stopping, huh? How about I bind the wound tight for you? Just make sure you get it looked at properly when you get the chance.” The boy took a bandage out of his pocket. “Give me your arm.” He pressed the fabric against the wound and deftly tied it off.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” he asked as he worked. “The dumb kid running around hunting demons even though he’s not a Demon Slayer. Why would you do a thing like that?” He looked into Sanemi’s eyes, his gaze almost painfully sincere.

Sanemi looked away. “I’m going to slaughter every last one of those hideous things.”

“Yeah?” The boy seemed unfazed by the bitterness in Sanemi’s voice. His tone remained light. “Keep this up and you’re gonna die, you know. You won’t take out a single demon fighting like that.”

“Oh yeah?”

Ignoring Sanemi’s bitterness, the boy stood up and held out a hand. “I’ll introduce you to a Trainer. To kill every last demon, you’ll really need to build up your strength.”

The boy’s smile was bottomless and bright. Despite himself, Sanemi was caught off guard.

And that was how Sanemi Shinazugawa met the Demon Slayer Masachika Kumeno.



“Hi, Sanemi! Injured again, huh?”

“Shut up,” came Sanemi’s reply.

Masachika was waiting in front of the house when Sanemi returned from his latest mission. For a moment he looked troubled by the gaping wound on Sanemi’s shoulder, but his smile quickly returned.

Sanemi didn’t try to hide his displeasure. “What are you doing here?”

“Just got back from a mission. A Kasugai Crow told me you’d finished yours too, so I figured we could get a bite together. You used your rare blood again, didn’t you? I told you, you have to stop cutting yourself up all the time.”

“That’s none of your business.” Sanemi clicked his tongue in annoyance as he pushed the hair back from his face. All he wanted to do was get some sleep, and here was this loudmouth in his face again. It was too much to take.

He’s always ambushing me like this. What is with him?

Sanemi tried to push past the other Demon Slayer, but Masachika grabbed his arm. “Stop right there. We’re going to Butterfly Mansion.”

“Excuse me?”

“You need to get that wound treated. And you could use a good scolding from Kocho while you’re at it.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.” Sanemi stepped up to Masachika, their noses practically touching. Sanemi’s fierce scowl put fear in the hearts of their comrades and the Kakushi. It even made older Demon Slayers flinch. Yet it had never had any effect on Masachika.

“I’m not kidding,” said Masachika. “Not over this.”

“I told you it’s none of your business, Kumeno.”

“Is that so?” He arched an eyebrow. “I’m the one who introduced you to our master, Sanemi. I’m basically your big brother.”

“Sanemi this, Sanemi that. Don’t call me by my first name like we’re friends.”

“You can call me by my first name. Then we’ll be even, right?” Masachika grinned. “Ma. Sa. Chi. Ka. Go on, give it a try.”

“You don’t get it!” Frustrated, Sanemi tried to yank his arm away, but Masachika’s fingers dug in like a turtle’s beak.

The standoff didn’t quite come to blows. Sanemi, in his weakened state, passed out mid-struggle. When he woke up, he was in a bed at Butterfly Mansion.



“I see you cut yourself again.” Kanae Kocho frowned as she studied Sanemi in the examination room.

“Get off my back,” Sanemi snapped.

“The injuries from your last mission haven’t healed yet, but you insisted on pulling your bandages off. Those wounds are going to fester. And your face is so swollen I barely recognize you.”

Kanae got out disinfectant to clean his wounds. Sanemi averted his eyes with a short snarl.

“It’s not all the demons’ work,” he told her. “That piece of garbage Kumeno wasn’t exactly gentle when he dragged me here.”

She sighed. “And whose fault is that? Stop making him worry.”

“I didn’t ask him to care. I mean, come on. What’s his problem?” Sanemi could hear his voice rising.

Don’t cut yourself. Don’t be so reckless in battle. Have you eaten? Try to get along with people. Take a bath. Stop glaring at everybody... On and on it went, day after day. The guy was always hanging around, pestering him, and Sanemi was sick to death of it.

“And he won’t shut up about the ‘brothers’ thing,” he snapped. “Just because we’re apprenticed to the same master...”

Kanae gently took his hands in hers. “You don’t have to be so angry. Try to

accept his friendship, okay?”

With a sharp breath, Sanemi looked away from her shining face. Somehow, it was impossible to argue with Kanae. Her hands were so gentle as she treated his injuries. In every movement of her fingers, he could feel her thoughtful care, the way she avoided touching his wounds directly to shield him from pain.

So warm ...

His mother, long gone, had warm, gentle hands too.

As Sanemi’s mind wandered, Kanae finished disinfecting his cuts and began sewing them closed with small, tight stitches.

“Kumeno cares about you, Shinazugawa,” she said softly. “He worries that you’re too kind for this line of work.”

Sanemi was yanked back to reality. “Huh?” He burst out laughing. “How am I kind? I’m a jerk. That brainless dolt’s the one who acts like a puppy begging to be kicked.”

Kanae shrugged slightly. She looked up as if she had something to say, then turned back to her work. Once each cut was stitched up, she pressed it with gauze and neatly wound a bandage in place.

The faint aroma of wisteria mixed with the harsh scent of disinfectant in the bright, tidy examination room.



When Sanemi left the room, Masachika was in the hallway outside, talking to another Demon Slayer. Sanemi scowled. Was the guy actually waiting for him?

Sanemi couldn’t get over Masachika’s persistence. He wondered what, exactly, he had to do to get Masachika to understand precisely how unwelcome he was.

Masachika’s conversation partner was a female Demon Slayer with delicate features and a butterfly hairpin worn high at the back of her head. Sanemi recognized her as Kanae’s younger sister, Shinobu.

Siblings were rare in the Demon Slayer Corps. Sanemi could barely imagine the traumas in Kanae's past: witnessing her parents slain by demons, being rescued by the Stone Hashira, and finally choosing to join the Corps. But after everything she'd gone through, it seemed unfathomable that she would let her younger sister sign up as well. If his own little brother Genya said he was going to join the Corps, Sanemi was sure he'd do anything short of murder to stop him. He was determined to walk this bloody path alone.

Masachika neared the end of the story he was telling. "And the Stone Hashira's flute was so loud that some old lady chased him around town, hitting him with a broom!"

Shinobu nearly burst out laughing, then hurried to settle her face back into a solemn expression. She cleared her throat. "I didn't know Himejima played the flute."

"You wouldn't think it to look at him, right? You know what else? He's a huge cat person. When the neighborhood cats see the Stone Hashira, they all ..."

What was he going on about? Sanemi knew that not every conversation had to be serious, especially during downtime between missions, but Masachika always took it too far.

"Oh, Sanemi!" Masachika noticed his annoyed comrade and raised a hand. "All fixed up?"

"Oh good," said Shinobu. "I need to talk to my sister. See you later." She dipped a quick bow at Sanemi before passing him to enter the examination room.

Masachika leaned playfully toward Sanemi. "See, you had everybody worried. Better not get yourself injured again, right? Hey, are you blushing?"

"Shut up."

Masachika's grin only broadened. Sanemi shouldered him out of the way, but Masachika showed no sign of irritation as he trailed along behind. "Hey, wait up!"

His carefree attitude only annoyed Sanemi more.

“I was just chatting with Shinobu about the Stone Hashira. He’s really something, isn’t he? Tough and reliable.” Masachika sighed, deeply moved. “So cool.”

All Sanemi had heard was some idiocy about flutes and cats. He sniffed indignantly to himself. *How exactly is that cool?*

“I want to be a Hashira someday. You do too, don’t you, Sanemi?” Masachika danced around his comrade. “Don’t you? Don’t you?”

Sanemi ignored him.

“We should bet on who becomes Hashira first,” Masachika continued, as if Sanemi had eagerly agreed. “I’ve got it! The loser can buy the winner dinner. But no cheap eats like soba. That’s hardly worth a bet. It’s gotta be fine dining, like sukiyaki. Ah, that simmered meat and tofu, and the sauce... A prize worth training for.” He let out an ecstatic sigh.

Sanemi couldn’t keep quiet another second. “Not interested,” he spat.

Masachika stared at him blankly. The look on his face only fanned the flames of Sanemi’s anger. *Look at him! Playing the fool as usual.* Why would a clown like this risk his life to hunt demons? How could he possibly hate them as deeply as Sanemi did? The thought made Sanemi’s jaw clench.



“Why not?” There went that arched eyebrow again. “Don’t you want to be Hashira? Girls will fall all over you. I can just see it.”

“Even less interested.”

“You don’t want girls to like you?” Masachika pressed. “You sure you got your head on straight?”

“Shut up.” Sanemi whirled around and glared at Masachika. Everything about this guy was dancing on his last nerve. “Seriously, what is *with* you? You keep babbling on and on and *on*.”

Masachika stopped too. To Sanemi’s surprise, his eyes filled with pity.

“Listen, Sanemi,” he said at last. “No matter how desperate you get, don’t give up hope. I mean, even if no girl is giving you a second look now, you’ve gotta tell yourself that someday a woman will come along who sees something in you. Keep your chin up, okay?”

“Huh?”

“You can do this.” Masachika patted Sanemi on the shoulder. Catching a glimpse of Masachika’s self-satisfied look, Sanemi felt ready to explode. He shoved Masachika’s hand away. “How can you talk about this meaningless drivel when we’re putting our lives on the line?”

Masachika shook his head. “How can I not? You’ve gotta enjoy life. Yeah, we could face death at any moment, but lots of Demon Slayers find love too. Some even start families. I mean, the Sound Hashira has three beautiful wives! Imagine that. Three! Wow, that’s a lot. Three wives. One would be enough for me. Just one lady I can love from the bottom of my heart...”

“All I want is to kill as many demons as I can,” Sanemi interrupted, his voice like ice. “Life’s not for fun.”

He’d given up anything resembling a normal life years ago, when his mother became a demon and he killed her with his own hands. Now he was driven by a boundless hatred of demons, a hunger for vengeance.

If he had any dreams left to speak of, they were for the little brother he’d left behind. Genya would fall in love, get married, have a bushel of kids, and die at a

ripe old age with a smile on his face. Sanemi would do anything to ensure that. If demons threatened his brother's happiness, he'd mow them down. If his very head were cut off, he'd die sinking his teeth into the windpipe of any demon he could reach.

He didn't need happiness for himself. Only for Genya.

"Got it?" he snapped. "Now get the hell out of here. Stop hassling me."

Masachika frowned and was silent for a moment "Oh," he said at last, his voice sounding strange. "I get it."

Sanemi huffed in satisfaction. *Finally he hears me.*

Masachika grabbed hold of Sanemi's wrist.

"What the...?" Sanemi scowled and tried to pull his arm away. "Get your hand —"

"We're going to get some ohagi," Masachika declared.

"Huh?"

"Don't sweat it. It's on me!" Masachika yanked on Sanemi's wrist. "Scarfig down a mountain of ohagi will cheer anybody up."

"You don't get it at all!" Sanemi shouted. "You stupid ass!"

"Fine." Masachika rolled his eyes. "I'll throw in some matcha."

"Like hell you will! Why ohagi, anyway?"

"It's your favorite, right? I've seen you eating it. You weren't glaring for once, so I figured you must love the stuff."

"What are you, spying on me? You creep! You're screwed up!" Sanemi showered Masachika in curses as his "brother" dragged him along with unexpected strength.

"Yeah, I know," said Masachika softly, sounding suddenly vulnerable. It was so out of character that Sanemi stopped fighting back.

Masachika let go of him and kept walking. "I get worried about you, okay? Risking your life is one thing. That's what we do. But..."

Sanemi stared at the back ahead of him, the kanji for “ruin” emblazoned across it, as it quivered.

“I don’t want you to give up on your life.”

Sanemi was at a loss for words as Masachika looked over his shoulder at him. He was calm, even smiling, yet somehow Sanemi felt like he was watching a man cry.



“New orders,” said Masachika as Sanemi entered the training dojo. “A joint mission, believe it or not.”

“You and me?” Sanemi frowned. “Why?”

“Didn’t expect that, huh? We hardly ever get to fight together.” Masachika sighed. “Now that we’re higher in the ranks, we’re too busy training the new kids.”

Time had indeed passed since their first meeting. They were both ranked Kinoe. At some point, Sanemi had stopped calling his loudmouthed comrade “Kumeno” and started using “Masachika.” The first time he had slipped and called Masachika by his first name, the other Demon Slayer had been so surprised he’d dropped his wooden training sword. Then a grin had spread across his face.

As they sat facing each other, cross-legged, Sanemi felt like he was back in his earliest training days. The particular smell of the dojo, sweat soaked into the wooden floor, was fondly familiar.

“It sounds like a tricky mission,” Masachika said.

“Is that why it’s a two-man operation?” Sanemi snorted out a laugh. “What’re our orders?”

“There’s this town a ways from here ...” Masachika outlined the situation. According to intelligence, people were disappearing near an abandoned house on the outskirts of the town.

“The missing people got anything in common?” Sanemi asked, rubbing his chin.

“They’re always kids.”

The faces of his little brothers and sisters flashed through Sanemi’s mind, then evaporated. When he looked up, Masachika was watching him with eyes that seemed to beg for reassurance. Masachika was the only person Sanemi had told about his mother and siblings.

Sanemi brushed off Masachika’s concern. “Any distinction between girls and boys?”

“Nope.” Masachika’s tone grew hard. “The truth is, before these orders came to us, several other Demon Slayers were given the mission. All but three of them are now missing.”

“No clue if they’re alive or not?”

“No.”

“What about the three who didn’t disappear? Dead?”

“No,” Masachika said slowly. “All three of them came back just fine.”

“And?”

“They reported that the house was empty. No demons, no missing kids, and no sign of the other Demon Slayers,” Masachika elaborated.

“What the hell?” Sanemi ran a hand through his pale hair. The story was confusing, like a prank a fox spirit would play. “Anything special about the three who came back?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have any more details.” Masachika sighed. “If we fail, the Hashira will have to go in.”

“So it’s serious,” said Sanemi, smiling grimly. The Hashira, pillars of support for the Demon Slayers, were only deployed in dire situations. But if he and Masachika, two Slayers of Kinohime rank, failed, they were the only remaining option.

Sanemi wasn’t about to let it get to that point. They didn’t need to trouble the

Hashira. No matter what kind of demon was lurking in that house, he'd kill it with his own blade.

"Well, then." He rose to his feet. "We'd better get going."

His friend nodded and stood as well. "First joint demon hunt in a while." He stretched luxuriously, gazing fondly at the ceiling of the dojo. Senior Slayers seldom had the chance to linger at their old training grounds. Abruptly, Masachika smiled. "Up for a quick sparring session first? It's been so long."

"Nah. I can kick your ass once the mission is over."

"Two hundred seven bouts total. One hundred fifty-nine wins for me, forty-two losses, six draws," Masachika announced cheerfully. "I won't go down easy."

"The answer's still no, dodo." Sanemi wasn't in the mood for harsher banter. He started out toward the town where their mission awaited them.

"So rude. What happened to that sweet child I knew?" Masachika frowned. "And at some point you got taller than me."

"Get used to it. I'll be the first to make Hashira too."

"If that happens, you're definitely buying me a beef bowl! The girls will prefer me anyway. Just wait and see!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Hurry up and quit wasting time," Sanemi scoffed.

"It doesn't have to be a swordfight. Name your contest. We can fight with beetles like we did when we were kids. C'mon, my honor as your big brother is on the line!"

"My idiot brother. Move it, will you?"

As serious as their mission sounded, Sanemi felt his heart lift. It had been a long time since he'd had an afternoon to enjoy with his old friend. A rare, faint smile crossed his face.



As reported, the town was a long walk from the dojo, and the house itself was

far on the outskirts. By the time Masachika and Sanemi arrived, the sun was hanging low. The sky had been overcast when they left, and now it was heavy with dark clouds that looked ready to open up with rain at any moment. The wind had a biting chill.

“This the place?” Sanemi asked.

At his side, Masachika gazed upward, impressed. “Some house, huh?”

It was indeed a magnificent old building, surrounded by luxuriant trees. Still, there was something cheerless about it. Perhaps it was the tangle of foliage, but the initial impression of tranquility soon gave way to dismal gloom.

“Kinda creepy.” Sanemi’s brow furrowed. Even the red spider lilies blossoming in the garden seemed to grow less beautiful and more threatening.

Sanemi shook off the feeling. “Let’s go in.”

“Right,” Masachika agreed. Together they stepped into the house.

“Ugh!” Sanemi was abruptly overpowered by an unfamiliar scent. It was heavy as incense, but chokingly sweet, with the septic tang of a ripe corpse. And yet, at the same time, the fragrance beckoned. Sanemi reeled.

“What’s that smell?” Sanemi shook his head, trying to shake off the cloying scent. Wrinkling his nose, he looked to his partner. “Hey, Masa—”

Masachika was gone.

“Masachika?”

Sanemi whirled around, but there was no sign of anyone in the palatial entryway or the dim hallway stretching ahead. He checked outside. No trace of Masachika there either. Anyway, Masachika would never abandon his friend without warning.

Sanemi glared into the darkness. “What’s going on?”



“What’s going on?” Masachika blinked repeatedly, baffled by the sudden disappearance of his partner. He’d vanished like a puff of smoke. He pressed on

into the house, the sickly sweet scent filling his nostrils. “Sanemi! Where’d you go?”

The house was silent, chilly, and deserted. The rooms were empty save for a few furnishings scattered around, as if abandoned in a hurry. Masachika found a dresser and an empty rosewood display case in a room deep in the house. Both were elegant pieces, but, shoved into forgotten corners, they looked curiously drab.

“Sanemi! Where are you?”

Calling his friend’s name, Masachika searched every cranny of the house. He looked in the kitchen and storerooms, even the stable and outhouse behind the main building, but Sanemi was nowhere to be found. Neither were the missing children or Demon Slayers. And Masachika sensed no sign of a demon.

“There’s no one ...”

They said the house was empty. No demons, no missing children, and no sign of the other Demon Slayers.

His own words came back to him unbidden. His concern deepened.

“Where’d you go, Sanemi?” he shouted. “If you’re here, give a holler. If you’re gone, say you’re gone!” It was the kind of demand that would make his friend groan and call him an idiot, but there was no reply.

He stood, baffled, in the dim hallway. That almost unendurable scent, sweetly rotten, assaulted his nostrils.

This smell hanging in the air... I can’t tell if it’s a fine perfume or a terrible stench. And it’s so intense I can barely think.

Where was it coming from? He hadn’t seen an incense burner anywhere in the house. Masachika covered his nose with the sleeve of his uniform and mentally retraced his steps.

Sanemi said, “Let’s go in,” and I said, “Right.” We stepped through the lattice door together. As soon as we walked in, the smell hit us...

And then Sanemi was gone.

No matter how he racked his brain, Masachika couldn’t remember anything

more than that. Not only that, his memory was growing foggier. He was beginning to doubt whether Sanemi had been with him at all. In a panic, he slapped his own face.

“Get a grip, Masachika!” he snapped to himself. “Keep your head on your shoulders!” With that, he stormed out the front door.

At the touch of the cool breeze outside, his head cleared to a surprising degree. With fresh eyes, he looked back at the house. There was no second floor, no storehouse, no wing he hadn’t explored. He was peering under the front veranda to see if there was anything hidden there when a voice called out to him from behind.

“You there. Boy. What are you doing?”

Masachika turned to find an old man standing outside the gates. The hair on his head was snowy white, but he seemed hale and hearty for his age, no cane in his hand. From his tightly pursed lips and hardened face, Masachika could tell at a glance that this was one stubborn old character.

“Don’t go barging into other people’s houses,” the old man said.

“I’m sorry.” Masachika bowed dutifully. The old man’s eyes, buried in wrinkled flesh, narrowed into mere threads.

“You a police officer?” His gaze flashed over Masachika’s black uniform. “Mighty young for that.”

“No, sir, I only look young. I’ve got a baby face. See?” Masachika was happy to go along with the old man’s mistake. Correcting him would only complicate things. The Demon Slayer Corps was a secret society, known to few and seldom mentioned by outsiders.

The old man looked dubiously at Masachika’s sunny smile. “And what brings the police here?”

Masachika scrambled to throw a story together. “Er...we’re investigating the resident of this house.”

“What’s there to investigate? The place is empty. No one lives there anymore.”

“Anymore?” Masachika hurried down the walk. “Do you know who lived here before? Would you mind telling me about them?” His words ran together in his excitement. Finally, a lead!

The old man cupped a hand behind his ear. “Eh?”

Masachika brought his face in closer and raised his voice. “Who lived here before, grandfather?”

“You don’t have to holler! And I’m not old enough to be called ‘grandfather’ just yet!” The old man grumbled. “I couldn’t follow you, is all, seeing as you were yammering a mile a minute.”

Masachika grinned ruefully to himself. His first impression had been accurate; this witness was not going to be so easy to handle.

But, soothed and humored by Masachika’s natural friendliness, the old man lowered his hackles. “When I was a young’un, a beautiful girl lived here with her servants. Name was Yae.”

After losing her parents as a child, he explained, Yae married young out of loneliness. Her new husband was handsome—“like an actor”—and played the gentle, attentive lover at the beginning of their relationship. But he showed his true nature when their daughter Sae was born.

“He was a right violent fellow,” the old man said sadly.

Mother and daughter were always covered in bruises, the neighbors noted. Yae’s husband sold the priceless antiques and hanging scrolls she had inherited from her parents and frittered the money away on booze and gambling. If Yae dared reproach him, he beat her unconscious. The servants all fled in terror of the man.

Listening to this, Masachika grew furious. “What a monster.”

“Sure was.”

“I should’ve beaten that guy to a pulp,” Masachika erupted, as if he had been there himself.

“Water under the bridge, my boy. What’s the use of getting angry now? Keep quiet and listen.” Even as he chided Masachika, the old man smiled slyly.

Throwing off another layer of reserve, he added, “Don’t worry. He got what was coming to him.”

One morning, after a rainstorm, the husband’s body was found floating in the nearby river. His eyesight had always been weak, and the area was rocky, so the official story was that he’d lost his footing and drowned. Not one person mourned his death.

“Everyone heaved a sigh of relief. They thought Yae could finally be happy with her daughter, but ...” The old man shook his head.

No sooner had Yae been freed from her abusive husband than her daughter Sae fell ill. Everyone in town felt pity for them and tried to help. Being close in age to Sae, the old man himself was often sent to the house with gifts from his mother. “Well do I recall,” he said, “what good care Yae took of her girl.”

Yae had cooled Sae’s brow, had spooned rice porridge into her mouth, had given her sponge baths, and had cleaned up her vomit and filth. She had worked tirelessly. Perhaps to hide the smell of medicated baths and disinfectant, or else to soothe her bedridden daughter’s nerves, she had kept fragrant incense always burning in the house. But just when it seemed Sae was recovering at last, she had suddenly taken a turn for the worse.

“Soon she couldn’t even speak anymore. Poor thing wasn’t yet ten when she passed.” The old man sighed, pained at the remembrance. “The evening of the wake, Yae broke down sobbing in front of the dresser in little Sae’s room.”

“Dresser?” Masachika asked.

“Little chest of drawers, low to the floor, with a mirror on top. Marvelous old piece of furniture Yae inherited from her mother. And I heard her mother inherited it from *her* mother. Made special to order, by all accounts, and the mirror was supposedly a charm to ward off evil spirits. It was just about the only thing she managed to keep her vile husband from pawning. No doubt she hoped it would protect them ...” The old man trailed off. Clearly the charmed mirror, handed down for generations, had not saved the mother and child.

“What happened to Yae after that?” Masachika asked, hardly wanting to hear the answer.

“Well, that, you see...” The old man furrowed his snowy brows. “Sae’s body was buried on the grounds, but not long after the mourning period, it was dug up. Dragged away by wild dogs or some such, I don’t doubt. All that was left was the girl’s kimono. Well, that was the last poor Yae could bear. She gave in to grief and drifted off someplace. No one knows what became of her.”

“And no one’s lived in the house since then?”

“Stood empty ever since.” Shyly, the old man confessed that he still tended the grounds, coming by once a day, as a gravekeeper of sorts. Perhaps, somewhere in his heart, he still longed for the girl who had departed from this world too soon, or her missing mother.

“Whatever else, it’s a fine house,” the man continued. “Can’t have ruffians coming along and getting up to no good in there.”

“Can’t let that happen,” Masachika agreed solemnly.

“Just this evening, you know, I saw a couple of seedy-looking characters headed this way, loud as all get-out. Got concerned and decided to take a look.” The old man gave Masachika a significant glance.

Masachika was oblivious. “I haven’t seen anyone like that,” he said, surprised. “Where’d they go?”

“Fool! I’m talking about you and your friend,” the old man sputtered. “But, well, now I get a proper look at you, you seem harmless enough. Maybe a bit dim, is all. Where’s your friend, though? He looked a right villain, he did. He’s not still in there, is he?”

The old man turned his suspicious gaze toward the house. Masachika cried in his heart, *Sanemi!*

The old man was talking about Sanemi. No mistake. So they really had come together.

And Sanemi had disappeared.

This had to be the work of a demon. Through some supernatural power, some wicked trick, it whisked certain people away, leaving others behind. But why Sanemi and not Masachika? Did that mean Sanemi had something in common

with the other abductees?

Masachika fell silent, thinking, and the old man started up again. “So now you know there’s nothing more to see here. Not even the police have the right to go tramping over an old man’s memories. Take the other fellow and go, you hear me?” With this final warning, the old man turned and strode away into the night.

After watching him go, Masachika looked up at the house rising from its thicket of trees. Now that he’d heard the old man’s story, the house seemed less threatening than it did sad. Where had Yae disappeared to after losing her daughter?

What if ...

Was she the demon he was after?

Perhaps Muzan Kibutsuji had given his blood to a woman in the depths of despair from the loss of her beloved child. The woman, now a demon, abducted children, unable to move on from her daughter’s death.

But where was she taking them? And what about the missing Demon Slayers, whose number now included Sanemi?

A thought flashed in the back of Masachika’s mind.



At the end of the long, dark hallway, Sanemi found a tatami-floored room. As he stepped inside, the scent grew even stronger.

“What is this?” Sanemi frowned at the strange sight before him.

A petite woman with long black hair piled on her head was bustling around the room, tending to six beds that stood in a neat row. Four children and two Demon Slayers lay in the beds, covered in linens so white they dazzled the eye. But two of the children and one of the Slayers were no longer breathing; flies had settled on their eyeballs and maggots crawled on their bodies. The children who were still alive had wasted away to skin and bones and stared vacantly at the ceiling with clouded eyes. The surviving Demon Slayer, lying in the bed

farthest to the right, was wrapped in blood-soaked bandages. He groaned in agony, sounding like a crushed toad, before a violent fit of coughing overtook him and he vomited.

“Oh, dear me!” The woman chirped. “It came back up again, did it? You poor dear.” She wiped away the vomit with a gentle hand and gave the Slayer water from a pitcher. He was too weak to swallow, so it only dribbled from the corners of his mouth. She wiped the sweat from his forehead and propped him up on the pillows.

Without pausing, the woman turned to the girl in the next bed and began to comb her greasy hair. “We’ll make you look cute. All right?” She smiled, endlessly loving, as she braided the girl’s hair. Her words and gestures were maternal, but she was no human mother. Fangs gleamed in her mouth, and her eyes were blood red.

“I’ll always be here to take care of you,” the woman half-sang as she stroked the girl’s head. Abruptly, she turned to Sanemi. “Oh, that’s right! A new boy’s come to join us. Please get along nicely, everyone.” She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, revealing the characters “Lower One” inscribed in her left eye.

Sanemi’s eyes grew wide, then narrowed again. That number was proof that this demon reported directly to Muzan Kibutsuji. “You’re one of the Twelve Kizuki.”

This was no ordinary demon. He was looking at one of the twelve demons with the greatest concentration of Muzan Kibutsuji’s blood. A thrill of pure hatred made the hair on his arms stand on end.

Holding his Nichirin Sword before him, Sanemi leapt from the tatami. He aimed for the woman’s slender neck. He focused his attack on that single point, determined to avoid hurting her victims without showing any mercy to the demon herself.

The demon waved a slim arm and parried Sanemi’s blade with ease. The crimson flower in her hair fluttered the slightest bit, as if a breeze had kissed it.

“Wha—”

“Tee hee hee! No mischief, now.” At the sight of Sanemi’s surprised face, the

edges of the demon's red lips curled up. Her smile, blossoming like a flower, was like a gentle rebuke to a naughty child.

Sanemi glared at her. "What'd you do with Masachika?"

"Masachika?" She frowned briefly. "Oh, I didn't want that one. Only you, my dear. Your little friend is doing just fine. He's looking for you, but he'll give up and go home soon enough."

The demon peered into Sanemi's eyes. "Poor darling," she murmured. Long, slender fingers stretched out to him. The moment they brushed his cheek, Sanemi grunted and leapt back. He readjusted his grip on his sword.

The demon brought her fingers to her lips. Her empty eyes narrowed with amusement. "You were treated cruelly by a parent, weren't you? I can always tell from the eyes. Your father? Mother? Or perhaps both?"

At this insult to his mother, Sanemi's blood boiled. "Monster!" He swung his sword wildly. "You can go to hell!"

"Dear me, there's no talking to you, is there?" With a nimble hop, the demon dodged Sanemi's blow. "That won't do. A child mustn't fight his mother." She laughed gently, and the sickly sweet air grew even thicker.

In the blink of an eye, the room transformed. Sanemi gasped and stared as the walls became slabs of pulsating red-black flesh. The clean white beds where the demon's victims lay were pale, flabby lumps, like overripe fruit.

Sanemi grimaced. "What is this foul place?"

"My belly." The demon's voice remained steady and kind, and her gentle smile never wavered. "You're inside me now, my child."

"Huh?" Sanemi wasn't sure whether to believe his eyes.

"You doubt your mother? What about now?" With a burbling sound, the bodies of the three dead children sank into the lumps on which they lay. The walls of flesh pulsed with greater strength.

A red tongue flicked out of the demon's mouth. She licked her lips. "Delicious."

"What'd you do with them?" Sanemi asked, his voice low with anger.

“Why, I ate them, of course,” the demon replied genially. “I sent them into my depths, my womb. Now we can be together forever.” She sighed, contentment in her soft voice, and pressed her hands to her breast.

Sanemi wanted to vomit. He no longer cared where he was or what was happening. He wouldn’t be satisfied until he took this demon’s head.

“Enough,” he snarled. “Quit this sick mommy act right now.”

“Act? Oh, dear.” She shook her head. “It’s the honest truth. Illness stole my own dear daughter from me. Now, in her place, I ease the suffering of children not blessed with kind, loving parents. You see, I can always tell which ones they are. The pain they’ve suffered. How sad they’ve been. I take these poor children as my own and become their beloved mother.”

“Don’t give me that!” Sanemi spat. “What kind of mother are you? You call this caring?”

His roar roused the half-dead Demon Slayer, who braced himself on his elbows and looked blearily at Sanemi. A faint moan escaped his lips.

“You ...” Sanemi remembered the young man’s face from his Final Selection. His name was Uraga. He’d been strong and hearty.

“Shinazugawa,” Uraga whispered, barely making a sound. His windpipe was crushed. “H ... Help ... me ...” An arm as skinny as a twig reached out lifelessly.

At this, the kindly expression slid from the demon’s face. She marched over to Uraga and raised a hand, baring her sharp nails. Before her claws could reach Uraga’s throat, Sanemi pulled him away. Uraga’s body was shockingly light.

As Sanemi set Uraga down in a spot away from the demon’s grasp, Uraga clutched at Sanemi’s uniform with a burst of strength. “My ... girlfriend ... waiting for me,” he groaned. “Please. I don’t. Want to ... die. Don’t want...”

Sanemi remembered Uraga saying he’d never gotten along with his parents, his mother in particular. Despite that, he’d dreamed of starting a family of his own as soon as he could.

Sanemi gritted his teeth. In his condition, even if Uraga could get immediate medical treatment, he had perhaps a fifty-fifty chance of survival.

“H ... elp ... me ...” the other Demon Slayer groaned again.

“It’s okay, Uraga. Don’t talk.” Reluctantly, Sanemi let go of the boy’s hand.

“So you’ve abandoned your mother, then?” the demon said in a flat voice. She looked at Uraga with icy eyes. “Just like *her*. Honestly, I have such ungrateful children. All the time I spend on you, and for what? Such a bother. Well, if you’re going to betray me, you can get out of my sight this instant. There’s no point in you being alive anymore. I don’t want you. Go ahead and die.”

Sanemi glared at her. “What are you rattling on about?”

Beside him, Uraga cradled his head in his hands. “Ah ... aaaah ...” His body began to spasm violently as his moans rose to a scream. “Aaaaah!”

“Hey!” Sanemi grabbed Uraga’s shoulders and tried to shake him out of whatever was happening to him.

“Shi ... nazu ... ga...wa ...” Uraga looked up at him pleadingly. Tears filled his eyes. Then he shook his head faintly, as if resigning himself to his fate. A smile spread across his tear-streaked face. “It’s no use. No one...can betray...Mother.”

He pulled a dagger from his uniform. In one swift stroke, he slashed his throat. A spray of blood bloomed and doused Sanemi in crimson.

“Uraga!” he cried.

With a final gasp, Uraga collapsed on the living floor, still spasming with pain. Before long, however, he stopped moving. Tears trailed down cheeks so hollow they were nothing but skin stretched over bone.

“You...” Sanemi growled, his voice trembling with anger. “What did you do to Uraga?”

“Dear me, what are you so upset about?” The demon was smiling again, the gentleness restored to her face. “That naughty boy tried to make me out to be the villain, don’t you see? My only desire is to live happily ever after with my beloved children. He was trying to spoil our joy. He took advantage of my generosity. Dying is the least he could do to make up for that.”

Inside Sanemi's head, he felt something snap. "Damn you!" His fury filled the room.



"Sanemi?"

Masachika whirled around. He was sure he'd heard his friend's voice, but there was no sign of him.

He'd returned to one particular room in the house. Before him stood the mirrored dresser the old man had described. Masachika wasn't sure why it haunted him. But if Yae had become a demon, it might provide a clue as to what had happened to her.

He crouched in front of it. The mirror was covered by a fine embroidered cloth. The dresser was clearly an antique, but otherwise it seemed to be an ordinary piece of furniture. The handles on the drawers, however, were made of something that resembled the metal of a Nichirin Sword. If the dresser had been designed as a charm against evil, the artisan might very well have used iron from Mount Yoko. That iron, bathed in sunlight, held the power to repel demons.

Masachika put a finger on a dull handle and pulled on the top drawer. It was empty.

Just to check, he reached inside. The tips of his fingers brushed something that made a rustling sound. "What's this?" he frowned. Something was stuck to the top of the drawer. He gingerly peeled it away from the wood, careful not to tear whatever it was. It turned out to be a piece of pulp paper, folded clumsily. Masachika opened it, not expecting much.

He froze.

Characters trailed along the page, written in red that had dried to black.

Mother made me drink poison.

Mother burned my throat.

Mother boxed my ears.

Mother tore out my hair.

Mother pulled out my nails.

Mother broke my bones.

Mother doesn't hug me.

Mother says she didn't want me.

Mother says she loves me.

Mother is trying to kill me.

*Help me help help help help help help help help help help help help help help
help help help help help help help help help help help help help help help
help help help help help help help help help help help help help help help
help help help help help help help help help help help help help help help*

The characters toward the end were badly drawn, half scrawls.

Masachika unconsciously raised a hand to his mouth, almost dropping the paper. Panicked, he grabbed it tightly with both hands. It made a dry crackling sound.

What is this? Did her mother...kill her?

He didn't want to believe it. But judging from what the old man had told him, this had been Sae's room.

Yae killed Sae ...

The world turned inside out. Everything he'd been told about this sad, noble woman was drenched in black.

Masachika stared, stunned, at the dresser. She'd gazed into this mirror the whole time, admiring herself. The picture-perfect image of motherly love, nursing her child.

What about her husband? Had his death really been an accident? And who dug up Sae's body?

Masachika's breath quickened. The images that filled his head made him sick.

The page was smeared here and there with long-dried tears. Had Sae bitten into the end of her finger to write the note in blood? The characters seemed to writhe in pain, radiating the terror and desperation of a girl not yet ten years old living through a nightmare.

Masachika's vision blurred. *The poor girl...* She must have suffered terribly. She must have been so afraid. A tear of his own dropped on the page.

Suddenly the choking fragrance grew weaker. He seemed to hear his friend's voice again, this time more clearly.

Masachika leapt to his feet. "Sanemi! I can hear you! Where are you?" As he whirled around, the tip of his Nichirin Sword caught on the fabric draped over the mirror. The silk cloth slid away and fell to the tatami mat on the floor.

Masachika stooped to pick it up, only to stop when he caught sight of the glass. "What?" he gasped.

In the mirror, Masachika could see Sanemi behind him. He was standing in the middle of the room, facing a female demon—no, not facing her. For some reason, he had his blade turned in the wrong direction. The demon was watching him with glee from a safe distance.

The color drained from Masachika's face. "Sanemi! She's behind you!" Masachika spun around with his own sword drawn, but his blade sliced through empty air. "What? But...they were right here!"

Baffled, Masachika turned his gaze back to the mirror. In the room reflected there, Sanemi was attacking empty space with one technique after another. The demon continued to watch with a sneer.

As he stared in confusion, Masachika noticed something even stranger. He himself wasn't reflected in the mirror. The display case in the corner of the room was also missing.

Realization crept over him. "That's not ... here." Was the mirror showing him a different room?

As Masachika leaned in to get a better look, Sanemi disappeared, replaced by an ordinary reflection. Masachika grabbed both sides of the mirror and shouted into his own pale, desperate face. "Wait! Sanemi! Where'd you go?"

He shook the mirror frantically, then stopped. In one corner of its reflection, he could see the display case. An incense burner sat on the top shelf. But when he looked over his shoulder, the case was empty.

“What?” This didn’t make sense. His mind in turmoil, Masachika looked into the mirror one more time. He stared hard into the glass, watching reddish smoke waft up from the incense burner. The sickly, rotten—but somehow fragrant—scent hung in the air as it had since he set foot in the house.

Was the scent coming from that burner? “It couldn’t be...” he murmured, and the red smoke in the mirror wavered.

Somewhere, in a dark corner of his mind, he heard a girl crying. She whispered, barely audible, in the voice of the dead.

Help.



“Dammit!” Sanemi cursed as the demon easily deflected yet another attack. “Why can’t I hit her?”

“You are a little fool, aren’t you?” the demon said, as though chiding a disobedient child. “I told you before, you’re inside me. No one can hurt me here.”

Sanemi didn’t want to believe it, but she was right about the last part, at least. Not only did his blade never touch her, but the flesh walls around him seemed impervious to damage.

Those walls had swallowed Uraga’s corpse. Sanemi couldn’t even return his body to his girlfriend. The thought ground away at him.

“Do be a good boy and settle down,” the demon urged. “You’re my child now. Mother will keep you safe. She’ll be with you forever. You can stop all this pointless fussing. Come now, I’ll give you a hug. Or maybe you’d prefer a lullaby?”

“Shut up,” Sanemi groaned. She was toying with him, and he knew it. She hadn’t attacked even once. She seemed to enjoy watching him fail, letting him

steadily exhaust his mind and body in futile attacks.

To have a chance at defeating her, Sanemi would have to get out of that pulsating room. But how? He kept coming back to that question and finding no answers. He was going in circles.

If I could at least get the kids out ...

Out of the corner of his eye, he glanced at the last two children. The boy was clearly very sick, his body shaking, perhaps from a fever. The girl seemed stable at the moment, but Sanemi had to get them both to a doctor as soon as possible.

To do that, he had to kill the demon. But in this room, he couldn't lay a finger on her.

Dammit!

The demon watched Sanemi's frustration with amusement. Then the smirk vanished from her face. "How?" she demanded.

"Huh?" At first Sanemi thought she was talking to him, but she was turned away, staring into space.

"This child... What is he?" Sanemi hadn't seen this look on her face before. The mocking glee was gone. For the first time, she looked unsure of herself.

"He shouldn't be able to see this," the demon whispered.

Sanemi's brow furrowed. "What are you going on about?"

From somewhere in the room, Sanemi heard the sound of pottery breaking. As he tried to figure out where it had come from, the scene around him changed. "What?" he cried.

The red-black world of flesh was gone. He was back in the tatami-floored room, and the demon who had been in front of him was now standing behind him. Glimpsing her over his shoulder, he leapt away to put some distance between them.

What was happening?

Looking around, Sanemi saw that the room wasn't quite the same as it had

been before. The snow-white beds were nowhere to be seen. Instead, the children were lying directly on the tatami mats. The doors, walls, floor, and ceiling all bore slashes from Sanemi's blade. In a moment, it all came together.

Illusions.

The white beds he had seen in the beginning, the terrible world enclosed by walls of flesh—they had been phantoms created by the demon to confuse him and conceal the truth. No wonder none of his attacks had landed.

As he pieced things together, Sanemi realized the rotten-sweet scent was gone as well.

Now that he knew he'd been dancing along with illusions, Sanemi was more enraged than ever. How dare that demon toy with his mind? She'd had him convinced he was locked in some alternative space, even if he didn't believe it was really the womb of a demon. He'd been focused on escaping that space, and it had blinded him to reality. He'd fallen for every one of her tricks.

But how had her spell been broken?

A familiar voice shouting his name answered that question. "Sanemi! Where are you?"

"Masachika! I'm here!" Sanemi called back.

He heard feet thudding down the hallway. A few seconds later, Masachika flew in through the open doors.

"Sanemi! So I figured it out in time." Beads of sweat stood out on Masachika's forehead, but he wore his familiar bright smile. "You're okay."

The moment Sanemi saw that smile, his friend's relief writ large across his face, he knew that Masachika was the one who'd saved him from the demon's trap. His anger melted away at once. Even if they hadn't been able to see each other, Masachika had been there, fighting alongside him.

He felt his face stretch, unprompted, into a smile. "You saved me, Masachika."

His friend grinned back. "What are big brothers for?"



Relying on the image in the mirror, Masachika cut through the display case with his Nichirin Sword. He heard the sound of porcelain breaking. With that, the hateful scent dissipated. He glanced down at the shattered fragments of the incense burner. Then, afraid to waste another second, he ran down the hallway, calling for his friend.

When Sanemi shouted back, Masachika raced in the direction of his voice. What had been a dead end when he was searching the house now opened up into a room. He charged through the open sliding doors and found the demon, two children, and Sanemi, thankfully still alive.

“Sanemi! So I figured it out in time,” he panted, looking his friend over. No new injuries. No bleeding. So Sanemi hadn’t become desperate enough to use his rare blood. The situation was still serious, but Masachika broke out into a smile. “You’re okay.”

Sanemi ran over, meeting Masachika’s smile with his own. “What’d you do? How’d you break the illusion?”

“There’s a mirror in another room that’s a charm against evil,” Masachika explained. “It was handed down for generations by the family that lived here.”

He told Sanemi about the letter he’d found, written in blood by a girl who was murdered by her own mother. He guessed that the daughter’s spirit had gotten its revenge by showing the truth about her mother in the mirror. He described breaking the hidden incense burner to make the demonic fragrance disappear.

Sanemi caught on immediately. “And the woman who killed her daughter…”

“It’s gotta be her.” Masachika glared at the demon.

The demon’s smile was like ice. “Well, well. Who knew that old mirror had some power in it after all?”

Masachika noticed the number inscribed in her left eye. Lower Rank One. So she was one of the Twelve Kizuki, closer to Muzan Kibutsuji than any demon Masachika had faced before. Even so, no fear rose within him. Nor was he

champing at the bit with fighting spirit. Inside him, there was only rage.

She had killed Sae. Even before she became a demon, that woman had been a monster wearing human skin.

“It certainly didn’t do anything to stop my husband from beating me,” the demon continued, sounding little more than annoyed. “I always thought the family stories about it being a talisman were bunk.”

“Sae helped us,” Masachika said, half to himself. Had Sae’s spirit cursed her mother, or was she trying to save her from adding to her sins? As he tried to imagine the dying girl’s state of mind, Masachika felt his hands clenching into fists.

In lazy, self-pitying tones, the demon sighed. “So the girl betrayed me again, did she?”

With a gasp, Masachika exploded in rage. “That’s a lie! *You* betrayed *her*! You killed her by inches! Every time she started to get better, you hurt her again! You poisoned her, crushed her throat, slapped her head, broke her legs! How could you do that to the child you gave birth to?” Anger made his voice shrill.

In the face of this outburst, the demon betrayed no emotion. If anything, she looked bored.

The rage inside of Masachika melted into sorrow. “I won’t let you get away with this, Yae.”

The demon flinched at the sound of her human name. She’d been unmoved by talk of her daughter, but now her face darkened and her voice grew harsh.

“I abandoned that name long ago,” she said. “My name is Ubume. A gem of a name bestowed upon me by my lord when he gave me this wonderful new form. I was named by the only one who’s ever understood me.” Now she sounded ecstatic. “All I ever wanted was happiness.”

The demon described how she’d endured her husband’s violence, hoping that someday they could be a happy family. Despite her patience, he ruined her, robbed her, and finally threatened to run off with some woman he met in a gambling den. She killed him and made it look like an accident, and no one questioned her.

But even with her abuser gone, her heart remained empty. She wondered why, no matter how hard she worked, she couldn't be happy. Then, when her daughter fell ill, Yae discovered that nursing the sick girl filled her with a peace she'd never imagined. As she cared for Sae, she felt the desire to live that way forever.

"But she tried to run away." The ecstasy on Ubume's face dissolved into disappointment. "She crawled across the floor, bent on leaving. I was so kind. I did everything for her. And that was how she repaid me."

"So you killed your own daughter? Is that what you're saying?" Sanemi said in a strangely even voice.

"Yes. I did." Ubume smiled gently. The look in her eyes was completely different when she gazed at Sanemi than it was when she stared Masachika down. It was as soft as if she were regarding her own beloved child. "But I regretted it immediately. Once she was dead, I was no longer the brave wife devoted to an abusive husband or the patient mother caring for her sickly daughter. I was nothing. That was when *he* appeared before me."

He shared his blood, understood her feelings. He told her she would make a powerful demon. To that end, he informed her, she must devour as many humans as she could.

"What do you think my first meal was?" she asked with a smile. "Sae's corpse."

Masachika groaned, disgusted. It was just as he'd imagined. His fists clenched even tighter.

The euphoria returned to Ubume's face. "Since then, I've snatched up so many, so very many children. I eat them, return them to the womb, make them my own. At last I've given this house a happy family."

The demon turned to Masachika. "You see, it's easy to find a way into the hearts of children who have been hurt. If their parents won't love them, they'll turn to anyone who will. More than one of my little ones has clung to me, thanking me, right up to the moment I swallowed them. Truly a blessing. I've been so happy. But I have no place for a child who holds his head high and meets a parent's eyes without fear. I prefer someone like your friend here."

Ubume looked at Sanemi with a blood-red smile of boundless benevolence. “You’re hurting, my child. Not just your body, but your heart as well. I can always tell when a child comes from cruel parents. I want to comfort you. I want to love you.”

Masachika felt a sudden rush of blood to his head. He was too enraged to spit out even a word of response. Instinctively, he attacked with every ounce of strength in his body. “Wind Breathing: Third Form! Clear Storm Wind Tree!”

Ubume tried to deflect his blade, but the power of the attack overwhelmed her. Her left arm, ripped from her body, tumbled to the tatami. Her red eyes glanced indifferently at the arm before turning back to Masachika.

He glared back. “Sanemi’s no pitiful child. Not even close. His mom loved him. She loved her sons from the bottom of her heart.” Emotion left his voice ragged. He hated the demon so deeply he could hardly bear it. This monster didn’t know what kind of life his friend had led. She had no right to talk that way about the most loving soul Masachika had ever known. She couldn’t imagine how he’d put his own body through hell, again and again, for what was left of his family.

“You don’t know the first thing about him, you wretched demon!” he cried, trembling with rage. “Don’t drag your filth over his memories!”

“Masachika! It’s okay.” Sanemi put a hand on his shoulder, and its gentle warmth sapped the fire out of Masachika.

“Sanemi ...”

“What’s with that look?” Sanemi gave him a crooked grin. “I swear, you come from a different world. I can’t count how many times people have jabbered on with their pet theories about me like they had some amazing insight. That includes my own dad. You can’t take it seriously.” His voice softened. “I’ve never thought I was pitiful.”

Masachika nodded wordlessly. Somehow, his friend’s unruffled reaction made the demon’s cruelty even worse. His jaw clenched.

“Anyway.” Sanemi turned the tip of his Nichirin Sword on the now one-armed demon. “Sorry to disappoint you, but you had me wrong from the start. I don’t

need an angel of mercy, and I can see the stinking demon you really are.”

“I suppose this means you won’t play nicely.” Ubume smiled. “It really is too bad. I think we’d make a lovely mother and son.”

“Shut up,” Masachika spat.

“It’s over,” Sanemi told her. “With your illusions gone, I can hack you to bits.”

“Perhaps you can,” Ubume said. With a graceful motion, she scooped her arm off the floor. She pressed it lightly to the stump. In the blink of an eye, flesh surged from the seam and fused the limb back in place. The speed of her regeneration made Masachika shudder. This was faster than any demon he’d encountered before.

“But what does that matter?” she mused. “I can always put myself back together. I’m a demon. What about you mortals?”

“We’ll just have to slice you up faster than you can heal,” Sanemi said with a cold smile. He leapt.

First form, second form, third form, fourth form, fifth form ... He danced around the room, firing off one technique after another. Ubume deflected some, reeled back from others. Masachika raised his own sword to aid his friend.

“Masachika!” Sanemi shouted. He signaled with his eyes.

“Huh?” Masachika turned in the direction Sanemi indicated and saw the children lying feebly on the tatami mats. Grasping his friend’s meaning, he grabbed them and moved them away from the fight. He propped them against a wall. Whatever happened, he would keep them safe.

The boy was about twelve years old, the girl perhaps not yet ten. It made Masachika’s heart ache to see how frail they were.

“We’re going to save you,” he reassured them. “Hang in there.”

The boy looked at him with sunken eyes. “M...mister...”

Despite himself, Masachika jumped. The boy had seemed too far gone to speak.

“You’ll...help ... us?”

“I will,” he promised.

“Thanks ...” Tears slid from the corners of the boy’s eyes.

It hurt to see how thin the boy was, how his cheeks had faded to ash. The girl next to him stared blankly at nothing, as if the spirit had been leeches from her body. Masachika gritted his teeth so hard he heard them begin to crack. How could even a demon do this to little kids? An almost crazed fury rose in his heart.

“You two stay here,” he said. “Don’t move.” He gripped the hilt of his Nichirin Sword.



Masachika was enraged.

Between attacks, Sanemi glanced with concern at his friend fighting beside him. The Masachika he knew was cheerful and simple as a summer breeze. Extreme emotions seemed beyond him. This was the first time Sanemi had seen naked anger on his face. The demon had set Masachika off in exactly the wrong way.

At the same time, it didn’t seem that Masachika was letting anger cloud his judgement or blind him to his surroundings. Sanemi worried that Masachika would let his feelings take over and waste his strength. But the movements of his blade were, if anything, sharper than ever. He picked up on Sanemi’s most subtle movements to anticipate which technique his friend would use next and respond in kind. Their movements flowed in sync like a steady, implacable wind.

I guess even at our worst, we’re still brothers. The corners of Sanemi’s lips turned up the slightest bit.

“Sanemi!” Masachika cried. “The head! Drive at her head!”

“I’ll take it clean off her shoulders,” Sanemi promised. “Monster!”

“Gracious!” Visibly struggling to dodge their coordinat-ed attack, Ubume

grimaced in irritation. “You really are stubborn children.” She danced close to Sanemi. Her leg shot out.

Sanemi leapt back to evade the attack, but her kick grazed his Adam’s apple. He flinched just before the next blow caught him in the solar plexus. For an instant, the wind was knocked out of him, and he went flying. He slammed into the tatami floor and gulped for air.

“Sanemi!!” Masachika cried as he lashed out at Ubume with his sword. “Wind Breathing: Third Form! Clear Storm Wind Tree!”

Ubume couldn’t escape his blade. She took the hit but kicked out at Masachika’s head. He dodged just in time, but the skin on his temple split and oozed blood. He staggered back, concussed. The demon stabbed a hand at his undefended torso. He avoided a direct strike, but her claws grazed his side and dug into his flesh. He screamed and twisted in pain.

Ubume licked every drop of Masachika’s blood from her hand, clearly relishing it. “I’ve eaten so many tasty children,” she purred. “Some of them even had rare blood. Each meal makes me stronger.”

Groaning, Masachika collapsed to his knees on the tatami. He tried to use breath control to stop himself from bleeding out.

Ubume reached for his neck.

“Masachika!!” Sanemi leapt in with sword swinging. “Wind Breathing: Fourth —”

In the midst of his attack, the wound in his throat opened up again. Fresh blood gushed forth. He doubled over in a coughing fit. He’d been injured worse than he’d thought. Gobbets of blood splashed on the tatami mats, dyeing them red.

Ubume stopped. She quivered from head to toe. “What is this?” she murmured. Her gaze wandered, searching, and came to rest on the blood spattered around Sanemi. Her eyes widened greedily.

“Why, you have rare blood, child.” A flush rose to her pale cheeks, and her eyes grew dreamy. “Quite rare, at that. Worth the blood of a hundred ordinary mortals... No, more! Much more!”

Buoyed by sudden passion, Ubume glided to Sanemi. She seemed entirely transformed. She no longer had eyes for the enraged Masachika.

“Ah, Sanemi.” As she lapped at his blood, the kindly smile spread across her red lips and flushed cheeks. “We truly are meant to be. Sweet child, I love you. I adore you. Sanemi, I’ll never hurt you again. Come, be with—”

Suddenly, she clutched her head and shuddered, nearly crumpling to the ground.

“What...? Why...? I can’t...”

Ha! Sanemi wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. *Can’t handle my flavor of blood, can you?*

From experience, he’d learned that the stronger the demon, the more powerful the effect of his marechi. It ought to be very potent to a demon of Lower Rank One.

“Blood...so strong...but how...?” Ubume panted, still cradling her head in her hands.

Sanemi couldn’t let this chance slip away. He gritted his teeth against the pain of his injuries and hurled himself at the demon. The move landed with full force. Knife-like gusts of wind raced toward the demon with the power of sandstorms.

Screeching, Ubume pitched forward at an extreme angle, narrowly evading the attack.

Masachika had stopped the bleeding on his side, and now he readied his sword again. “This ends here,” he snarled. “Go apologize to Sae and all the other kids you’ve killed!”

Sanemi watched as his friend’s blade carved a flawless arc in the air.

“Wind Breathing: Third Form! Clear Storm Wind—”

At that distance, Masachika was sure to take the demon’s head off. Sanemi readied himself for victory.

Then he heard a blood-curdling scream. “Stop!”

The little girl stood in front of Ubume, holding out trembling arms to protect her from Masachika. She looked up with tears in her eyes.

“Don’t hurt my mommy,” she begged.

“Wha—?” In the space of a heartbeat, Masachika deflected his attack away from the girl. The blades of wind missed her by a hair.

Masachika was knocked off balance. His breathing fell a heartbeat out of sync. The demon took advantage of this brief slip to attack, tossing the girl aside like a doll.

Focused on saving the girl, Masachika had been forced to drop his own defenses. The demon’s arm plunged into his gut. He shuddered and coughed up fresh blood.

“You should have cut the child down,” the demon told him.

Masachika could only grunt. The Nichirin Sword fell from his hand. His body followed, hitting the ground with a sick thud. The demon watched him fall with cold eyes. “Foolish child.”

Sanemi’s sword sliced soundlessly through her neck. Her head tumbled to the tatami floor.

From the depths of Sanemi’s crushed throat came the howl of a wild animal. He was drowning in an anger with no outlet, an emptiness that seemed impossible.

The demon’s head still bore its false smile when, along with its fallen body, it vanished into thin air.



The Kakushi arrived soon after the battle to whisk the children away into their care. They treated Sanemi’s injuries, but Masachika, despite regaining consciousness, was beyond medical help. All they could do was make him as comfortable as possible in the demon’s house.

Sanemi sat beside his friend. One of the Kakushi said tentatively, “Lord

Shinazugawa. You've lost a significant amount of blood—"

"It's nothing," Sanemi cut him off. "Leave us alone."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," the Kakushi said. "You also have some broken ribs, and the damage to your throat is beyond what we can take care of here. I strongly recommend treatment at Butterfly Mansion right away. Otherwise, in the worst case, both of you could—"

"Shut up." Sanemi glared at the Kakushi, daring him to go on.

"Are you certain you're all right?" another Kakushi asked. It was a young man with sleepy eyes. "Can you state that definitively?"

Sanemi nodded curtly.

"That's that, then," the Kakushi said. "We withdraw."

"But, Goto—"

"These are the people who risk their lives to fight demons for us. At the very least, we can respect their feelings." The Kakushi hurried his colleague out of the house.

Sanemi and Masachika were left alone together. A different incense filled the air now, a cleansing scent burned to dispel the stench of blood.

"Sanemi ..." Masachika struggled to remain conscious. His face was as white as a sheet. "The kids ... What about the kids?"

"They're both safe." Sanemi sat his friend up, cradling his body. Masachika's skin was cold, a sure sign that the flame of life was dying within him. Sanemi clenched his jaw, swallowing the urge to scream. "The Kakushi took them back to Butterfly Mansion. Relax."

Masachika smiled with relief. "That's good. What ... about you?"

"Me?" said Sanemi with forced cheer. "You know me. Of course I'm fine."

Even on death's doorstep, Masachika still had room in his heart to worry about the children and his brother Demon Slayer. Sanemi gritted his teeth until they hurt. The base of his throat ached with unshed tears.

The little boy had wept with joy at the sight of the rescue squad, but the girl

had remained in a stupor, not reacting in any way when the Kakushi spoke to her. Sanemi thought bleakly of Uraga, who slit his own throat rather than betray his false mother, only moments after begging for a chance to be reunited with his girlfriend. This girl seemed similarly entranced by Ubume, unable to escape her poisonous promise of love. Sanemi shuddered at the thought of what kind of future lay ahead for her.

“She’ll ... be okay,” Masachika whispered, as if reading Sanemi’s mind. “Terrorized for so long...hard to escape the demon’s control. It’ll...take time. But she’ll...recover.”

His friend’s heroic words made Sanemi’s eyes sting. He pushed back the tears and tried to steady his voice. “What’re you worrying about other people for? I swear, I’ve got such an idiot for a brother.”

Masachika narrowed his eyes as if blinded by sudden brilliance. “Hey ... Sanemi?”

“Yeah?”

“Even ... when I’m gone...” Masachika’s voice was little more than an exhalation. “Eat. Sleep. Try...to get along with people.”

Sanemi couldn’t speak.

“Make sure ... to live ... your life.”

Sanemi hesitated before choking out, “Yeah.” If he said anything more, he would start crying. He would scream: *Don’t die.*

Masachika looked up at Sanemi and smiled. To Sanemi, it was the finest sight in the world. It was hard to believe he’d ever found it annoying, had tried to wipe it off Masachika’s face. That smiling face had saved his life time and again. Sanemi had only gotten this far because Masachika was with him. Thanks to Masachika, he’d been able to live as a human being again.

Why did someone so good have to die? Because he’d refused to harm a little girl? It was too absurd to accept. Sanemi wanted to shout to the heavens: *If there are any gods up there, help him.*

Masachika was so much kinder than he was. So much stronger. This was a

man who could go on to save so many more lives. He could bring the world happiness.

“It’s ... up to ... you now ... Sanemi ... Don’t die ...”

“Masachika.”

“Be ... happy ...” The light faded from Masachika’s eyes.

“Masachika!” Sanemi clutched his friend’s body to his chest and wept ragged sobs.



The Demon Slayer Masachika Kumeno was laid to rest in the same tomb as his brother, both slain by demons. Sanemi set flowers and ohagi on the grave as an offering. A tepid breeze made the white petals flutter. He lit a stick of incense. A thin line of smoke snaked into the air.

“In the end,” he said at last, “I didn’t know anything about you.”

He hadn’t known Masachika had a younger brother who had been killed by a demon before his eyes. Or that Masachika had blamed himself for his brother’s death, despite his parents’ constant reassurances. Or that he had brushed off his mother as she had begged him, weeping, not to throw his own life away by joining the Demon Slayer Corps.

Sanemi had only seen the cheerful, unruffled surface. He’d assumed that Masachika came from a peaceful background, a carefree life. But deep down, Masachika had shared Sanemi’s undying hatred of demons. He’d simply dealt with it in a different way. He never let anyone, not even Sanemi, see his anger.

Now Sanemi understood why the battle with Ubume had driven Masachika into a rage. In Ubume’s young victims, he’d seen his own lost little brother. No wonder he’d always played big brother to Sanemi, insisting on the apprentice-brother relationship whenever he had the chance.

“Guess I looked like a little brother to you, huh?” Sanemi said to the grave.

In reality, there wasn’t any great difference in their ages. Sanemi had thought

of Masachika as a peer, or even as a pesky little brother.

His lips quirked upwards. “You really were the most difficult big brother ever,” he said, and the zinnias on the tomb fluttered as though they were laughing.

Sanemi, let’s go get beef hotpot.

Sanemi, I picked up some ohagi. Put on the tea.

Aw, I lost again! You’ve got some nerve, Sanemi. Let your big brother keep his dignity!

Now, now. How are you gonna attract girls if you make that face?

Sanemi! I caught you a rhinoceros beetle. Cut up some watermelon and save a slice for me.

Make sure ... to live ... your life.

Masachika had taught Sanemi not to give up on his life. But what about Masachika’s life? Was it happy? Sanemi fell silent, immersed in memories of his lost friend.

“Hey, Masachika,” he said at last. “That stupid kid brother of mine went and joined the Demon Slayer Corps, of all things.” Anger and annoyance mixed in his voice. As if trying to soothe him, the zinnias fluttered. Reluctantly, he smiled as memories stirred within him.

Sanemi remembered the day he became a big brother, his first look at newborn Genya with his monkey face and eyes screwed shut. When he timidly grasped that tiny hand, he was sure he saw the baby smile. At that moment, he knew he’d do whatever it took to keep this fragile little person safe.

Other brothers and sisters came after that, and Genya grew old enough to help his big brother around the house. Together they vowed to take care of their mother and younger siblings. Even so, as far as Sanemi was concerned, Genya would always be his baby brother.

When their mother became a demon and Sanemi killed her, Genya, the only other survivor in the family, wept and shouted that his brother was a murderer. The poor kid still felt bad about that, years later. But it had never bothered Sanemi. Nothing Genya did could ever hurt him.

During the dark times, Sanemi's sole joy was Genya's life, Genya's happiness. It was all he prayed for; it was his reason for living.

"I don't care how much he hates me for it," Sanemi told the grave. "I'll never give him my blessing to join. He doesn't want this life."

Head hanging low, he whispered, "I'm not making a mistake, am I, Masachika?"

The only response was the murmur of the wind.

If Masachika were alive, what would he say? He'd thought of Sanemi as a younger brother, had probably prayed for a bright future for him...

You'd tell me I'm being a dodo. You'd tell me to put myself in Genya's shoes. You'd suggest we could guide him, teach him. And you'd do it all with a grin on your face.

You always were a better person than me.

"I can't do that," he said aloud. "I just can't."

Masachika died because he was the better person. He'd had the biggest heart in the world, and the world stole his life away.

Genya was a good kid too, the kind of person who put others before himself. No matter how much Genya hated and cursed him for it, Sanemi had to stop him from being as cruelly rewarded for his kindness as Masachika had been.

Sanemi wasn't as strong as Kocho. He couldn't welcome his brother into this world and fight alongside him. He wanted to protect him, and it seemed like the only way to do that was to push him away.

Sanemi crouched silently before the grave for a long while. At last he stood up. The wind teased his hair and ruffled the flowers.

"See ya," the Wind Hashira said quietly. He turned his back, decorated with the character for "kill," to his friend's grave and slowly walked away.

The flowers swayed to and fro, as if carrying his words to the next world.

The wind blew.





Chapter 2
**THE COURTSHIP OF
HOTARU HAGANEZUKA**

As a swordsmith, Hotaru Haganezuka was above reproach. He adored swords with a burning passion and devoted his life to honing the techniques passed down in his family through generations.

But as a human being, he left something to be desired. From toddlerhood, when he drove his parents to the point of mental breakdown, he'd been infamous for his aggravating personality and outrageous behavior. He chased Demon Slayers with a knife while shouting threats, throttled other swordsmiths, and even picked fistfights with the Hashira.



"Hotaru's got me at my wit's end." Tecchin Tecchikawahara, seated at the head of the table, let out a sigh as he bit into a mitarashi dango.

The dumplings were a gift to Haganezuka from the Demon Slayer Tanjiro Kamado. Haganezuka had lost his head at Tanjiro for ruining a sword he'd been working on. Ranting about the blood and sweat he'd shed over that sword, Haganezuka had insisted that the boy owed him a lifetime supply of dango.

To Tanjiro's considerable credit, he was trying to honor this demand. Personally, Tecchin found it shameful that a grown man would hold a grudge against a fifteen-year-old boy. Tecchin was Haganezuka's godfather and had raised him as a son, and now his shoulders slumped with dejection. "I guess I brought him up wrong."

"No, no," Kanamori said gently as he made tea. "You can't blame yourself for the way he carries on, not when he's nearing forty. Right, young Kotetsu?"

With the conversation lobbed in his direction, Kotetsu lifted his face from his dumplings. "Yup. Bad with people, short-tempered, stubborn—that's just the way he is. It's not anybody else's fault."

"Say what you will, but I feel responsible." Tecchin wiggled in his seat like a child. "Wish we could smooth those edges of his a bit. Any ideas?"

"Nope," Kotetsu shrugged. "It'd be easier to teach a bear to shake hands than train that guy to show some manners."

Kanamori, drawing on a wealth of experience from his long life, was slower to admit defeat. “Hmm...let’s see.” He cocked his head. “How about finding him a wife?”



Kanamori’s proposal—“Mission: Get Haganezuka to Settle Down and Become a Slightly Better Person”—received Tecchin’s enthusiastic support. The matchmaking moved forward with surprising speed. Their first concern was that Haganezuka, the target, would tell them to drop dead. But, after a lot of awkward twisting and fidgeting, he agreed to try an arranged marriage. In fact, he didn’t seem entirely displeased. It was decided that a marriage meeting would take place on the first auspicious date.

The date arrived.

Kanamori and Kotetsu lurked in the garden of the high-class restaurant where the meeting was scheduled. Naturally, they were there to spy on the potential couple. Since the swordsmith village was closed to outsiders, they’d had to find a location in a neighboring town. Kanamori had selected the meeting place, so he’d had no problem sneaking himself and Kotetsu onto the grounds.

In the center of a spacious dining room, two figures sat facing each other. They were, of course, Haganezuka and his prospective bride. Tecchin sat plopped between them like a small, squat decoration. The young woman, dressed in finery for the occasion, was lovely. The showy peony pattern on her kimono suited her slender frame.

“She’s really pretty, isn’t she?” Kotetsu whispered. “Lucky Haganezuka.”

“She’s the chief’s type,” Kanamori whispered back. “Take a gander at her face. Doesn’t she look just like Lady Kanroji?”

Tecchin claimed to have chosen the perfect match for Haganezuka after careful consideration and research. But as imperturbable as their chief usually was, and however much authority he wielded with wisdom and ease, Kanamori knew that when women got involved he stopped thinking with his head.

“I can’t believe a beauty like that is willing to consider Haganezuka,” Kotetsu

whispered.

“He’s quite the looker himself, you know. I bet they managed to turn him out nicely in his matchmaking photo.”

“Are you saying looks are all that matter?”

“No, no, my dear boy.” Kanamori shook his head firmly. “It won’t matter a jot if there’s no love. Love, my boy, is all.”

Kanamori’s own marriage had started with love at first sight, and now he was in the running for the village’s most doting husband. Kotetsu worried that he would yet again start to passionately extol his wife’s charms, right then and there.

As this whispered exchange continued, the marriage meeting got underway.

“Er...do you have any hobbies, Mr. Haganezuka?” the young woman asked.

After a long pause, Haganezuka said under his breath, “Making swords.”

In the ensuing silence, the *kuk-kunk* of the bamboo fountain in the garden echoed like a gunshot.

“So...your first name’s Hotaru?” the woman continued. “That’s such a lovely name.”

Another pause. “Thank you.”

“Isn’t it just?” Tecchin interjected. “I gave him his name. But all the boy does is complain it’s too cutesy!”

The young woman covered her mouth with a hand and laughed melodically. “I’m sure he’s just self-conscious about it. He’s so modest, after all.”

Kuk-kunk!

“As for me, my hobby is cooking. Do you have a favorite food?”

“... Mitarashi dango,” Haganezuka grunted.

Kuk-kunk! Impossibly, the clack of bamboo against stone seemed to keep getting louder.

“What do you do on your days off?”

“... eat mitarashi dango.”

“Goodness! You really must love dango!”

“... wish I could eat it every day.”

“You’re adorable, Mr. Haganezuka!”

Kuk-kunk! went the bamboo, as if punctuating the statement.



Kanamori’s eyebrows lifted. “Huh! It doesn’t seem to be going too badly. Although that bamboo fountain is nerve-wracking.”

“It’s even,” Kotetsu ventured, “going...well?”

“It is, isn’t it? I’m sensing sparks! But he’s barely speaking, and I can’t hear a word he says.”

“I think he’s nervous. Look at him squirm in his seat.” Kotetsu frowned. “It’s kind of weird in a grown man.”

“Well, he’s dedicated his entire life to the sword. In his own way, he’s very innocent. At least he’s behaving himself, not putting his shortcomings on display, and the lady seems taken with him.” Kanamori leaned forward, as excited as if he were seated at the table himself. “Our plan might just work out.”



“Well, then!” The chief stood. “Why don’t you young folks take a turn in the garden on your own?” It was a standard suggestion for the second stage of a matchmaking session. The first stage safely cleared, the couple moved outdoors.



It was an eye-catching sight: a muscular man in a Hyottoko mask and a beautiful woman in the blush of youth strolling along a garden path, side by side.

“You’re a quiet man, aren’t you, Mr. Haganezuka?”

“... Yes.”

“I’m always impressed by a man of few words. I feel like he’s bound to be a deep thinker and a loving soul.”

“... Is that so?”

“Shall I make some mitarashi dango for our next meeting?”

“Please.”

Haganezuka’s voice was barely audible, and he hadn’t been able to hold much of a conversation about anything but dango, but the mood was decidedly warmer. There might even have been a hint of romance in the air.

“It’s a miracle, Kotetsu,” said Kanamori, his voice low. He dabbed at his eyes. “It looks like spring has finally sprung for our Haganezuka.”

“Look!” Kotetsu cried. “She took his hand! He’s wiggling like an octopus!”

“He’s got the jitters, sure enough.”

“That’s how he acts when he’s embarrassed? Creepy.”

“It is, indeed, a bit creepy, my boy. But let us pray this miracle continues all the way to the altar.”

Haganezuka and his match approached the large tree behind which Kanamori and Kotetsu were hiding. The two spies shrank back as far as they could and held their breath.

The young couple stopped and gazed at one another.

“Mr. Haganezuka.” The young woman’s tone was formal, as if announcing a solemn decision. “If this courtship is to continue, I have one request.”

Haganezuka’s shoulders jumped up to his ears. “Okay.”

The pair watching from behind the tree swallowed hard. *It’s happening!*

“From everything you’ve told me,” she began, “it’s clear that you value your work as a swordsmith deeply.”

“I-it is?” Haganezuka’s voice grew a hint brighter.

“However,” she continued, smiling gently, “don’t you think swords are a relic of the past, with no place in this modern age? No one needs to hack away at each other anymore. Why don’t you switch to making knives and tools and such? I don’t want my husband working on barbaric weapons.”

Haganezuka froze. On the other side of the tree, the two eavesdroppers stiffened and grew pale.

“This is bad!!” Kotetsu hissed. “This is a disaster! What is that woman thinking?”

To Hotaru Haganezuka, who loved swords more than anything in the world, there could be no words more shocking. He would murder someone for saying less. Kanamori and Kotetsu imagined the picturesque garden bathed in blood, Haganezuka branded a killer, the swordsmith village shuttered.

“In the event of an emergency, Kotetsu,” Kanamori whispered frantically, “take the young lady and flee. To secure your escape, I shall tickle Haganezuka with all my might.”

“Got it.” Kotetsu nodded. “Try not to die.”

A shudder of anxiety raced through both men.

But time passed without the expected scream of rage. Instead, Haganezuka stood still as a rock.

“Er, Mr. Haganezuka?” the woman said.

At last Haganezuka opened his mouth.

“Those swords,” he said slowly. “The weapons you call barbaric. There are men and women who take them up to protect strangers at the cost of their own lives.”

The woman looked perplexed. “What?”

“Even battered and beaten, they push forward, never backing down, their

spirits unbroken. I'm proud to forge the swords they wield. I'm proud to be a swordsmith."

The woman had nothing to say to this.

"I'm sorry," Haganezuka said. "But I have to withdraw from this match."

A chill breeze passed between the pair as the woman stared at Haganezuka, still speechless.

He hadn't exploded. He hadn't let emotion overtake him and shouted at the woman who denigrated his beloved swords. He'd simply, calmly, rejected her. Kanamori and Kotetsu had witnessed the honor of a swordsmith and his bond with a certain Demon Slayer.

And so the curtain fell on the courtship of Hotaru Haganezuka.



"Well, I guess that one wasn't meant to be. The next one, though..." The chief remained optimistic. "Let's find another likely lass." He cheerfully sorted through a stack of marriage photos.

"Forget it. At least I have my swords." Haganezuka lay sprawled across the tatami, the picture of dejection. Several days after the marriage meeting, he was still glum.

"Don't loll around like that. Have some self-respect, a big fellow like you." Kotetsu set a plate piled high with dumplings on the table. "Look! Tanjiro sent some more mitarashi dango. Cheer up already."

"Please do," Kanamori agreed. "Aren't you lucky to make swords for such a thoughtful Slayer? Frankly, he's better than you deserve."

Haganezuka sniffled listlessly. "That's what he owes me for ruining my hard work."

"Enough sulking. Have some tea." Kanamori poured hot tea into Haganezuka's cup. "Why, look! A tea leaf standing straight up! Haganezuka, that's a very lucky sign." He stared in delight at the good omen. "I bet this

means your next match will work out,” he added, sure this would please Haganezuka.

But Haganezuka burst into anger. “It’s only lucky if you don’t notice it until you’re drinking the tea! You’ve ruined my fortune! How do you expect to make this up to me?”

“What?”

“If my next match fails, it’ll be all your fault!”

At this outburst, even Kanamori lost his patience. He couldn’t tolerate false accusations.

“Why did you raise that boy to be such a trial?” he demanded the next time he saw Tecchin.

“Weren’t you the one who told me he’s a grown man now and he’s responsible for his own behavior?”

“Well, yes, I may have said that. But it’s simply too much. He’s a terror to deal with. To put it bluntly, he’s a mess.”

“Not my problem.” Tecchin shrugged off the scolding and turned his Hyottoko mask briskly aside.

Beneath his own mask, Kotetsu sighed in exasperation. It had been foolish to imagine that one brush with romance would turn Haganezuka’s life around.

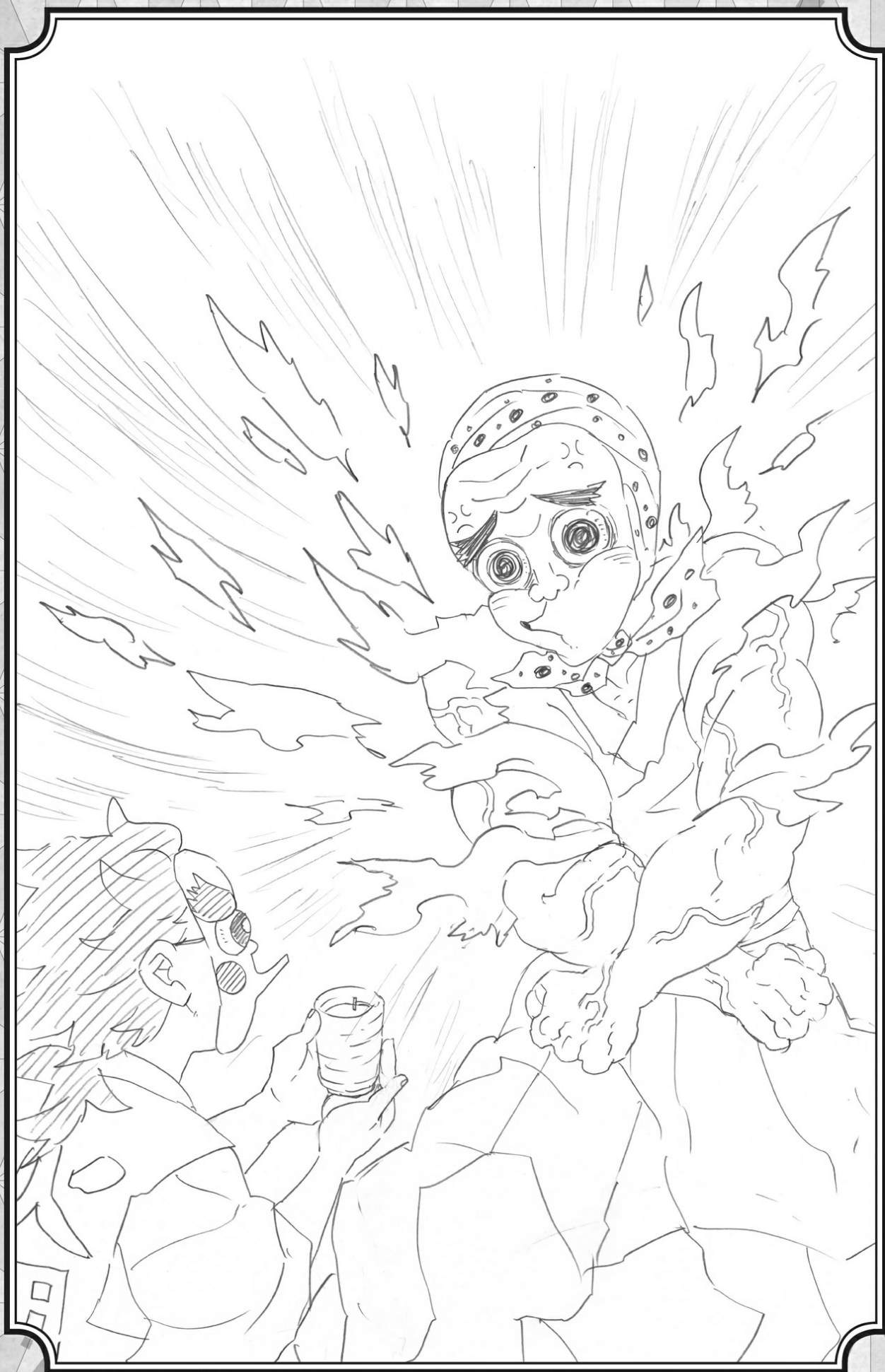
But he’d showed integrity, in his blunt way, against the insult to his beloved swords. Kotetsu had to admit he’d been impressed, even exhilarated. As a swordsmith of the hidden village himself, he shared the same pride. Haganezuka’s relationship with a Demon Slayer who believed in his work and trusted him with his life had changed the obstinate man, much as he tried to hide it, for the better.

Which was exactly why ...

Kotetsu lifted his eyes to the heavens. *Whatever gods may be listening, please fix Haganezuka’s garbage personality, and then bless him with a very patient woman who loves swords.*

Kotetsu prayed in his heart for spring to bloom for Hotaru Haganezuka, but a

long, late winter seemed to lie ahead.





Chapter 3
FLOWER AND BEAST

“I. No. Su. Ke. ... Inosu. Ke.”

“Yes! You did it! You said it!” With a cry of delight, Inosuke somersaulted into the air. At long last, he’d succeeded in getting Nezuko to speak his name.

When he’d been brought to Butterfly Mansion the previous afternoon to have his injuries treated, he’d learned that Nezuko was learning to talk again, and he’d been excited to teach her a few words. “Boss” still came out more like “boff,” but now she could manage “Inosuke.”

The short-tempered Demon Slayer had shown surprising patience in this endeavor, making his joy at success all that much greater. He was so excited his feet didn’t touch the ground.

After a number of somersaults, Inosuke made her say his name again, determined to make the newly vocal girl into a proper minion.

“Inosuke?”

“Yeah!”

“Inosuke!”

“That’s it! Keep saying it! It’s the name of your boss, after all!” Inosuke’s proud voice echoed through the courtyard of Butterfly Mansion. “You did real good, so here’s your reward. One shiny acorn.”

He handed her the smooth nut. Nezuko held it up to the sun. Fangs still gleamed in her mouth, and her eyes still glowed red; she remained a demon. Even so, Tanjiro had been thrilled that his little sister could once more stand in the sunlight.

Remembering Tanjiro’s smile, Inosuke looked at Nezuko, standing before him in the middle of the day, and felt a funny, warm, fluffy feeling inside. It was a feeling he often got around those two. Usually he pushed back against it, not wanting to let mushy feelings make him stupid, but this time he felt like he could let it happen. After all, an underling’s happiness was a boss’s happiness too.

Snorting with satisfaction, Inosuke envisioned lording over his growing army of minions. His fantasies were interrupted by a girl’s scream and the sound of

something thudding to the ground in the laundry area in the corner of the courtyard. The voice belonged to Kiyo Terauchi, one of the three nurses at the mansion.

“What’s going on?” Inosuke whipped out his sword and charged, Nezuko hurrying behind him. “Enemy attack?”

It turned out to be only the laundry pole falling. Freshly laundered sheets and nightclothes spilled across the ground, covered in dirt. Kiyo sat before the mess, weeping into her hands. Aoi Kanzaki and Kanao Tsuyuri tried to comfort her.

“Who did this?” Inosuke demanded, still out for blood. His skin pimpled into gooseflesh. “A demon?”

“A crow,” Aoi replied.

Beneath his boar head, Inosuke scowled. “A Kasugai Crow?”

“Of course not,” Aoi snapped. “Why would a Kasugai Crow do something like this? It was an ordinary crow.”

“An ordinary crow...until it tried to devour your face!”

“Enough of your violent notions!” Aoi rolled her eyes. “It was raining for days, you see, and the laundry was piling up...”

Excited to wake up to a clear morning at last, the girls had set to work cleaning the mountain of dirty bedding and nightclothes. They’d finally finished the washing and were hanging the clean laundry out to dry when a crow swooped down out of nowhere and snatched Kiyo’s hairpin. Kiyo lost her balance and fell, taking the laundry pole down with her.

“Hair fin?” Inosuke frowned. “That some kind of fish? Can you eat it?”

“Not ‘fin,’ ‘pin.’ See?” Aoi gestured to the butterflies in her own hair.

Now that it was pointed out to him, Inosuke could see one of the butterfly decorations was missing from Kiyo’s head. But why was he supposed to care? He wouldn’t even have noticed anything different if the girls hadn’t made him look.

What? That’s all?

The wind went out of his sails. “She hurt?” he grunted.

“No,” said Aoi. “Just scraped her knees a little. Right, Kiyo?”

Kiyo, still sobbing, bobbed her head. Kanao patted her back awkwardly. Nezuko followed Kanao’s lead and stroked Kiyo’s hair. “It’s okay,” she said, clumsily trying to comfort the crying girl. Kiyo nodded gratefully.

Inosuke started to feel that this was really stupid. Why was she even crying? She wasn’t injured, and the bird hadn’t taken anything important, like food.

“Quit crying,” he snapped. “It’s just a thing, y’know.”

Kiyo’s shoulders hunched and her sobs rose to a yelp. Aoi’s sharp almond eyes narrowed at Inosuke. But the first to speak up was not Aoi, but quiet, cheerful Kanao.

“It is not!” she said fiercely, splotches of indignant red blooming on her pale cheeks. “That hairpin’s not just a thing to Kiyo! It’s a precious gift from our sister Kanae. It’s proof that we’re family!” With that, Kanao turned on her heel and ran off.

Inosuke gaped after her.

“Oh, Kanao,” Kiyo whispered through her sobs.

“It’s okay,” Aoi cooed as she helped the small girl up. Her eyes met Inosuke’s. *You wanna start something?*

He braced himself. But Aoi only looked at him reproachfully and moved silently on.



“So that’s what happened. Girls, huh?”

Inosuke sat cross-legged on the bed where Tanjiro lay, recuperating from injuries he’d sustained in the swordsmith village. Inosuke’s face was that of a little boy telling his mother about some playground indignity.

The mohawked boy in the next bed groaned with disgust. “I’m trying to sleep here. Make him pipe down, Tanjiro.” He yanked the blankets over his head.

In a flash, Inosuke was ready to start punching. “Say that to my face, weirdo head! I’ll take you!”

As always, Tanjiro was quick to smooth things over. “So then what happened, Inosuke?”

Inosuke clicked his tongue dismissively and resettled himself on the bed. “It wasn’t the shrimp who’s always yapping about something. It was the quiet one. She just blew up at me out of nowhere.”



Aoi was forever lecturing him about something or other, so Inosuke had developed a tolerance for her sharp tongue. When she got angry at him, he just shrugged and filed the complaint away. But Kanao hardly ever spoke. He hadn't expected her to scold him, much less over such a little thing. The more he thought about it, the more unfair it seemed. His breath grew ragged.

"She said it wasn't just a thing," he grumbled. "It was, I dunno, a present or something. And then she up and ran off."

"Huh." Tanjiro looked thoughtful. "Kanao did that?"

"It was just a hairpin. And the pipsqueak wasn't even hurt, so what was she crying over? I don't get it."

Tanjiro listened without interrupting. In his head, Inosuke could hear his gentle reproach. *Are you sure you're not the one in the wrong here? Is that the way to talk to someone?* In reality, Tanjiro didn't say a word. But neither did he nod along to anything Inosuke said. He only gazed at him with gentle, sad eyes.

That jerk. Why couldn't he say what was on his mind?

Those eyes knocked Inosuke off his stride. He felt the same discomfort as he had when Aoi had simply stared at him in silence. On the bed, he squirmed uncomfortably.

Finally Tanjiro spoke. "Hey, Inosuke," he said quietly. "What would you do if someone took that boar head from you?"

Inosuke was outraged. "What do you think? I'd grab it right back!"

"What about the fundoshi you always wear?"

"I'd punch the guy who stole it!" Just thinking about it got Inosuke worked up. He brandished his fists menacingly.

"I know." Tanjiro smiled gently. "This is just me, and maybe I'm wrong, but I get the impression those things mean a lot to you. Your boar head belonged to the animal that raised you. And the fundoshi came from your parents. They wrote your name in it."

Inosuke snorted. "I don't have any parents."

“Inosuke,” Tanjiro chided him.

“The boars raised me,” he insisted, but another part of him was doubtful. *Why do I keep this fundoshi, anyway? It’s just a thing. Why would I care about it?*

Tanjiro sat wordlessly as Inosuke hunched over, pondering. He remembered how he’d discovered the writing in his fundoshi when he was little. He’d been curious about what it said and asked the mochi man to read it for him. That was how he’d learned, for the first time, that his name was Inosuke Hashibira.

“This is prob’ly yer name,” the old man had said. “Yer ma and pa gave it to ya. Make sure you cherish it.”

Right. It’s got my name on it. That’s why it’s important. Sojiro got me mixed up for a minute there.

“It’s not the cloth that matters,” he said. “It’s the name. I’d be in big trouble if I lost my own name. It’s not like I can write it out myself.”

Tanjiro didn’t argue the point. “That’s true. So let’s put the fundoshi aside for a second. The boar head...that’s an important keepsake for you, right?”

“Yeah.” Inosuke nodded.

“I think that hairpin has the same kind of meaning for Kiyo that the boar head has for you.”

“You mean she got it from her mom?” Inosuke cocked his head to one side. Now that Tanjiro mentioned it, Kanao had said something about getting the pin from somebody important. Who was it again?

“Kanee? Kanei? Kanai? No, Kanae!” Inosuke clapped his hands together, then cocked his head again. “Who’s Kanae?”

“I think that’s Shinobu’s older sister. Shinobu and Kiyo have told me about her before.”

“Shinobu’s sister?” In his mind’s eye, Inosuke saw Shinobu treating his injuries.

“I stitched up the wound,” said the Shinobu in his mind. “Now don’t pick at it. And don’t pull the thread out on your own.” She twined her little finger around

Inosuke's. "Pinky promise."

That was all she'd done, yet he'd been unable to touch the stitches.

"She wasn't just Shinobu's sister," Tanjiro said. "Kanao, Aoi, Kiyo, Sumi, Naho...she was a big sister to all of them, even if they weren't related by blood."

"Yeah? What happened to her?"

"She died," Tanjiro said shortly. "I heard she was a Hashira."

"Huh," Inosuke said.

Death was part of life. When you died, you just went back to the earth. Big deal. But somehow, when he thought about this dead woman he didn't even know, he saw the smile Shinobu had given him when they made that pinky promise.

"Have you noticed that everyone at Butterfly Mansion wears butterfly hairpins?" said Tanjiro. "I think Kanae wore one too."

Inosuke listened in silence as Tanjiro explained that for the girls of Butterfly Mansion, the hairpin was a reminder of the woman who had cared for them and was no longer with them.

"So that's it," he said slowly. "That's why she got mad?"

Tanjiro smiled. "It's great that Kanao is getting better at speaking her mind, huh?"

"I guess it's not just a thing," Inosuke murmured, almost to himself.

Tanjiro nodded. "That's right."

Inosuke hung his head sullenly, then abruptly jumped off Tanjiro's bed. He was about to run out of the hospital room when Tanjiro said, "I bet Kanao went to look for the hairpin too."

Inosuke stopped short in amazement. How had Tanjiro known where he was going?

"I'll come with you," Tanjiro said. He started to climb out of bed.

"What? No!" Inosuke growled. "I'm just going to grab some food. I'm starving."

I'm not going after some stupid pin." He stabbed a finger at Tanjiro. "And you're not supposed to move. You better not follow me! Get some sleep, got it?"

With that, he raced away. The boy in the next bed, who'd seemed to be asleep, sat up abruptly. "That guy always has to put up a front, huh?"

"Yeah," Tanjiro said with a smile. "He's a lot like you, Genya."

"Me and the pig boy?" Genya sputtered. "I'll kill you!"

But Inosuke had no way of knowing about this exchange. He was already halfway down the hall.



Roaring, Inosuke jumped from the porch with more force than was strictly necessary and landed on the ground with a mighty thump. Aoi, walking by with a basket of re-laundered sheets, stopped and turned to stare.

"Sup," he said.

Kiyo, walking beside Aoi, shrank back and hid behind her sister. Aoi glanced at Kiyo before turning back to Inosuke. "What do you want?" she said, her voice hard.

Inosuke ignored the question and marched over to them. Aoi clutched the laundry basket protectively to her chest. Behind her, Kiyo grabbed her apron strings.

"You remember where it went?" he demanded.

Aoi stared blankly. "What?"

"The crow that stole the peewee's hairpin. Which way did it go?"

"Oh..." Aoi's arms relaxed around the laundry basket. She freed one hand and pointed. "That way. It flew toward that big mountain."

"That way, huh?" Inosuke's gaze followed Aoi's finger. He was about to run off again when a sudden thought stopped him. He pulled an acorn out of his pocket and held it out to Kiyo. "Here," he said roughly.

The girl looked up at him hesitantly. “Huh?”

“It’s my favorite acorn. It’s super smooth, all shiny like a diamond. You can have it.”

“O-okay.” Kiyo tentatively stretched out a hand, and he set the gleaming acorn in her small palm. “It’s so pretty,” she murmured. Her eyes were puffy and red. The lone butterfly pin in her hair, missing its partner, fluttered in the breeze.

“Sorry about before,” Inosuke said.

“Uh...huh.” Kiyo nodded timidly.

With no further word, Inosuke started off in the direction the crow had flown.

“Inosuke!” Aoi called out behind him. He stopped and glanced back to find her gazing at him thoughtfully.

“I only saw it for a second, so I’m not sure,” she said. “But I think the crow had a single white feather in its tail.”

“Got it. Thanks for the tip!”

Aoi’s face softened for a moment. “Be careful.”

“Yup!” With that, Inosuke was in motion once more. Ahead of him, the mountain reddened in the setting sun.



Arrgh! Where could it be?

Kanao tramped around the mountain at a loss, searching for the crow that had flown off with Kiyo’s hairpin in its beak. It had been an ordinary-looking bird except for a flash of white in its tail. She’d chased it as best she could from the ground and was pretty sure it had landed halfway up the mountain. But as her search wore on with nothing to show for it, she grew less and less sure of what she’d seen.

She peered up into the trees and sifted through the grass at her feet, but neither the crow nor the hairpin appeared. The sunlight streaming through the

trees grew lower and redder. With the world around her dimming, Kanao began to panic.

She had good night vision. She'd be able to continue searching even after the sun completely vanished. She was more concerned that staying out late would needlessly worry her sisters back at the mansion. But if she gave up and went home, Kiyo's hairpin would likely be lost forever.

Kiyo ...

Kanao's throat tightened. Kiyo was a cheerful girl, but she'd cried inconsolably, curled up and shuddering with sobs, at the theft of the hairpin. It reminded Kanao of the way she'd been when she first arrived at Butterfly Mansion.

Kiyo had cried often then. Her family had been snatched away by a demon, and she had trouble recovering from the shock. One thing or another would remind her of a lost loved one and make her burst into tears.

Kanao remembered one afternoon in particular. She was sitting on the veranda, catching her breath after a training session, while Kiyo crouched in the corner of the courtyard, sobbing quietly. Kanao was used to the new girl crying. She didn't think much of it. She stared absently at the yard, looking at nothing in particular, not even the passing butterflies.

Then, out of nowhere, Kanae crossed the courtyard to Kiyo. Kanao heard Kiyo say something in a hoarse voice, but she was too far away to make out the words. Kanae looked at the bereaved girl with warm, sad eyes. She spoke, and Kiyo nodded. Kanae's long, slender fingers pulled Kiyo's hair away from her eyes and pinned it in place with a pair of butterfly hairpins. The girl wiped her eyes and smiled.

Kanao could see that Kanae was taking on the emotions Kiyo couldn't bear, as she'd done for all the girls at Butterfly Mansion. She drew out the girl's sorrow, anger, loneliness, and fear and began to soothe her pain. Even at the cost of her own health and happiness, Kanae was a born healer.

To Kanao, Kanae had been kindness made flesh, a beautiful soul to the core. It was as if all the warmth in the world had been drawn together and shaped into human form. Kanae and Shinobu took the orphaned girls at Butterfly Mansion

and made them into a family. The butterfly pins Kanae gave them were a visible reminder that, no matter what, they had a home.

The hairpins certainly weren't rare or expensive. They were, as Inosuke had said, just things. But the simple act of putting the pins in their hair made the girls feel that they weren't alone. For Kanao, at least, that was no small matter. She was sure Shinobu, Aoi, Naho, Sumi, and Kiyo felt the same.

That was why she had spoken so roughly to Inosuke, even though she knew he hadn't meant to hurt anyone's feelings.

"You're under the same roof as young people your own age," Shinobu had told her just a few days before, after Kanao returned from a mission. "Why don't you try talking to them? It'll help you grow, the way making friends with Tanjiro has."

Given that Kanao had only just started being able to make decisions for herself without flipping a coin, Shinobu's suggestion was difficult for her. When she brought Inosuke bubbles to blow, or gave Aoi medicine to administer to Genya, she pushed the objects at them and hurried away without saying a word.

And today, when she was really trying, it had come to nothing. Her shoulders slumped.

And here I thought I had changed a little, thanks to Tanjiro.

Was she incapable of friendship? Was killing demons really all she could do?

Feeling gloomier with each step, Kanao pressed on. At last, however, she had to admit there was no sign of the hairpin. Reluctantly, she started down the mountain.

I'm sorry, Kanae. I can't do anything for Kiyo. I'll never be like you or the other girls.

As her thoughts drifted in this direction, she caught sight of someone at the foot of the mountain, silhouetted in the setting sun. She squinted, trying to make out a face, before realizing that she was staring at a boar's head.

"Sup." Inosuke raised a hand in a curt greeting. Before she could ask what he

was doing there, he tossed something at her. “Here.”

Baffled, she caught it in both hands. She pulled her palms apart to look inside, and her eyes grew wide as saucers. “You found it,” she gasped.

The threads were a bit tangled, and part of a wing was torn off, but it was Kiyo’s hairpin. Kanao lifted her face from the ornament. “But...how?” And why? What had possessed him to come looking for it? She swallowed her questions and waited for Inosuke to explain.

The boy snorted and tossed his head. “You’re looking at Lord Inosuke, king of the mountains. These slopes are full of my minions. All I had to do was ask around about a weird-looking crow, and they coughed it right up. Piece of cake.”

Kanao’s eyes grew even wider. “Are you saying you can talk to animals?”

“Course.” Inosuke nodded smugly. “Least, I can tell what they’re thinking.”

“That’s amazing,” said Kanao. With those simple words, Inosuke was immediately in high spirits.

“Well, y’know.” He puffed his chest out, all but begging her to keep the compliments coming. Despite his gruff voice and the imposing boar head on his shoulders, he reminded her of a little boy. “Thing like that catches the light. Crows love shiny stuff.”

Kanao held the hairpin up. The sun had almost completely set, but the last of the evening light set the pale butterfly wings on fire. They really did glitter and shine. Dyed crimson in sunlight, the hairpin was very beautiful. In its reflection, she could almost see Kanae. Overcome with emotion, she squeezed the pin to her chest, being careful not to break it.

“Look,” she said, “I’m sorry for yelling at you before.”

“Huh? Where’d that come from?”

“Thank you, Inosuke.” Kanao bowed.

Inosuke jumped in surprise. In the silence, Kanao realized it was the first time she’d ever called him by name. She felt strangely exposed, but it wasn’t a bad feeling.

“Y-yup,” Inosuke said at last. He thumped his chest. “I’m the boss, after all.”

Kanao nodded and handed the pin back to him. This was sure to bring Kiyo’s smile back. The thought made her heart grow warmer.

But Inosuke shook his head. “You give it to her.”

“But you found it—”

“It’s a family thing, right?” Inosuke cut Kanao off. “You’re family, so you give it to the pipsqueak.”

His voice was low, his tone rough. The boar’s eyes stared blankly at her. And yet, in that moment, he seemed so very gentle.

Kanao nodded. Inosuke stretched dramatically. “Wanna get going?”

“Okay.”

“I’m hungry.” As if to lend credence to this statement, his stomach growled.

“Um...” Kanao hesitated. “If you want, we could stop and get some sweets on the way home.”

The town was a little out of their way, but if they hurried they could make it back before supper. Kanao could buy sweets for Inosuke and some of the crunchy senbei crackers Kiyo liked.

“Nah,” said Inosuke. “I’d rather have tempura right away. When we get back, you should fry some up.”

“What?” Kanao faltered at the unexpected response. “Tempura? Me?”

Aoi, Kiyo, Sumi, and Naho handled the housework at Butterfly Mansion. Aoi channeled her dexterity into first-rate cooking skills, so she took charge of meals, with the other girls assisting her in turn. Kanao never got involved in cooking. She was slowly learning to make decisions, but she still had trouble taking the initiative, which made her a hindrance in the kitchen.

When Kanae was alive, Kanao had once joined the other girls in preparing a spread for a flower-viewing party, but even then she was relegated to the role of taste-tester. The closest she’d come to preparing a meal was helping Kiyo boil some rice gruel when Tanjiro woke up from a coma after battling the Upper

Rank Six demon, but she'd been helpless without Kiyo's instructions.

"I'm not much of a cook," she began. "When we get home, Aoi can—"

It'll help you grow, the way making friends with Tanjiro has.

She heard Shinobu's voice in her head. And Kanae's gentle laughter ...

Kanao pushed back the words she'd been about to say. "Teach me, and we'll make it."

She smiled up at Inosuke.



That evening, Kanao made tempura under Aoi's watchful supervision. Somehow it ended up both burned and raw. Nevertheless, Inosuke lustily devoured the pile of fried vegetables and seafood, crying, "So good! More!"

Kiyo, her stolen butterfly once more in her hair, played with a shiny acorn. "Guess which hand it's in," she said to Nezuko, thrusting out two small fists.

Nezuko's eyes flicked back and forth. "This one!" she finally cried.

Kiyo giggled. "Too bad! It was in this hand."

"Not again!"

As they watched the girls play, Naho and Sumi puffed up their cheeks with jealousy.

"No fair, Inosuke!" said Naho.

"Please give us shiny acorns too!" Sumi pleaded.

Aoi arranged plates for Tanjiro and Genya on a tray, already lost in plans for the next day's cooking. The only way to salvage Kanao's tempura was to cut it up into small pieces, serve them on rice, and pour tea over the whole thing.

Shinobu watched them all with love. When her eyes met Kanao's, she smiled, and warmth filled Kanao's heart. She wished the moment could last forever, that the joy she felt would never end.



“Inosuke! Hold on tight!” Kanao tucked herself under Inosuke and dragged him to his feet. His muscled body was heavier than she’d imagined. She staggered briefly under her own injuries. She braced her legs and concentrated on staying upright.

In this room in the Infinity Castle, she and Inosuke had managed to defeat the Upper Rank Two demon, but only after Shinobu made the ultimate sacrifice. They were both badly injured. Kanao had lost almost all the vision in her right eye, and Inosuke was covered in gashes and blood. She’d paused long enough to stitch and bandage the bloodiest wounds, but it was a miracle they were still standing.

Even so, they had to keep moving forward. Half dragging herself and Inosuke, she forced herself into the hallway.

The boar’s head had fallen from Inosuke’s face, and he was weeping like a child. He’d just learned, after a lifetime of believing that his human parents had abandoned him, that his mother had been killed defending his life. At the sound of his sobs, Kanao felt her own tears welling up again.

Shinobu ...

She tried not to cry. The inside of her nose prickled, and her vision blurred.

“You know ...” Even Inosuke’s voice was weak, very unlike his usual cocky snort. “When we first met, I thought I’d seen Shinobu somewhere before. But that wasn’t it.” He took a deep breath, and more tears streamed down his cheeks. “Shinobu ... looks like my mom.”

At the sound of Shinobu’s name, Kanao could no longer hold back her own tears. She prayed that wherever Shinobu was now, she could at last be reunited with Kanae.

“Don’t start crying on me,” Inosuke told her.

“Well, then, don’t *you* cry,” she sniffed.

“I’m not crying!” The obstinate bellow returned. Inosuke pushed her arm

away, jammed his boar head back on, and started to rip off the bandages she had just applied.

Kanao grabbed his arm. “You can’t take those off! I just sewed you up. All your wounds will open again!”

“Cloth dulls my senses,” he muttered.

Kanao didn’t back down. “Didn’t Shinobu warn you to keep your wounds clean?”

At the sound of Shinobu’s name, Inosuke flinched. Grudgingly, he stopped picking at his bandages.

“Put it on,” he grunted.

“What?”

Inosuke tapped a fist to one side of his boar’s head. “The thing. You know. C’mon. Your hairpin.”

“Oh ...” Kanao realized her hair was all over the place. Tucked away in the jacket of her uniform were the hairpins from her two big sisters.

“It’s the final demon hunt,” Inosuke told her. “Bring your family.”

Kanao gasped. Her eyes flew open, then narrowed as she smiled. Memories came pouring back, one after the other. Images of Butterfly Mansion, her friends’ happy faces, the beloved people she’d sworn to protect with her life.

If only she’d been able to keep every promise.

At the very least, she could take the hairpins back to the mansion, to the girls who were still there praying for her safety. She’d give them the pins along with the peace her sisters had bought with their lives.

I swear ...

With her lips pursed tight, Kanao tied her hair the way Kanae used to tie it for her. She pinned it back with her own butterfly from Shinobu.

Watch me, Shinobu, okay?

Because she was going to defeat Muzan Kibutsuji. She was going to make sure no one else ever felt the way she did in that moment.

Please watch over me.

“Let’s kick some butt and get back home,” Inosuke said, glaring down the hallway that led deeper into the castle.

Kanao nodded silently. Then they ran together into the end of a long, long night.



Chapter 4
**A PROMISE
FOR TOMORROW**

“For those who have already manifested the mark, it’s too late. Those on whom it appears, without exception, will invariably ...”

The clear yet ephemeral voice passed through him without meaning, as though she were speaking a foreign language.

Twenty-five.

Without exception, those with the mark died by that age. His own older brother had passed when he was eleven.



The emergency meeting of the Hashira came to an end after a vigorous discussion of the training sessions needed for the battle to come. It was crucial to review every move without repeating a lesson and wasting time.

Muichiro made his way out of Ubuyashiki Mansion. He was wandering through the picturesque rock garden when he heard a voice from behind. “Do you have a minute?”

Without turning around, he knew who the low, quiet voice belonged to. “Oh, hello, Himejima.”

The Stone Hashira, Gyomei Himejima, narrowed his sightless eyes. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“To me?”

“Mm.” Himejima nodded. “If you don’t mind, let’s go somewhere we can sit and talk.”

Muichiro followed Himejima out to the gazebo. Built in one corner of the garden for relaxation, it admitted a refreshing breeze, and the thatched roof had a pleasant scent. As Muichiro settled into a seat, he could hear the calls of songbirds mixed with the rustle of the wind in the trees.

“So what’s this about?” he asked the older Demon Slayer.

Himejima got to the point. “What Lady Amane said at the meeting.”

Oh.

Muichiro had guessed as much. No point in beating about the bush. “You mean the mark? About only living to twenty-five?”

“Yes.”

“You know, I was in an extreme state when the mark appeared on me.” Muichiro tossed his head. “It’s probably not even a true mark.”

Much remained unknown about the Demon Slayer Mark. Some believed it was a kind of concentration of the bearer’s life force. If that were true, those with the mark died young because they used up their lives more quickly than other people. But that power allowed a Demon Slayer to hold his or her own even against Upper Rank demons. Muichiro had been able to beat the Upper Rank Five demon precisely because of the mark.

“What about you, Himejima?” he said. He’d heard that Himejima was twenty-seven. If he bore the mark, he’d already passed the oldest recorded life span. Was that even possible?

“Don’t worry about me.” Himejima sounded unusually on edge. “I’ve always been ready for death. But you ... You’re only fourteen.”

Muichiro flinched at the sadness on Himejima’s face and in his voice. The blind giant was arguably the most powerful fighter in the Demon Slayer Corps, with a massive physique, the envy of other men, shielding the steadfast heart of a bodhisattva. And here he was worrying about Muichiro.

“Tokito,” said Himejima hesitantly, “I don’t mean to cast doubt on you as a Hashira or question your readiness. But...are you all right?”

Muichiro was taken aback. “Why do you ask?”

He hadn’t meant to sound sarcastic, but Himejima’s brow furrowed. “The mark appeared on you in your battle with the Upper Rank demon. Your time is short.”

“Maybe,” said Muichiro. “But it’s the same for Kanroji. Why don’t you worry about her? Or Iguro?”

Himejima’s frown deepened. “Why would you bring up Iguro?”

“It’s just...” Muichiro stopped short. “He likes her, doesn’t he?”

For a fleeting instant, Himejima opened his lightless eyes wide. “I had no idea.”

“You didn’t notice?”

“No. I’m surprised that you did.” It was a slightly rude remark, but Himejima said it without rancor. His stern, monk-like face softened. Muichiro had the sudden thought that if demons didn’t exist, if they hadn’t been forced to fight this war, Himejima would have lived a simple, quiet life somewhere far from turmoil. He was not a warrior at heart.

“You’ve changed,” said Himejima. “Or was this the real you all along?”

Muichiro didn’t know what to say. It was true that, in the past, he wouldn’t have noticed a comrade’s feelings, no matter how painfully obvious. He’d even forgotten his own twin. Once, he had cared only for killing demons. Now it seemed like he had been living in a thick fog, unable to see or hear.

The voices of Tanjiro, who reminded him of his late father, and Kotetsu, who had risked everything to save him, had led him out of that fog and into the light in which he now stood. Thanks to them, the world had beauty and color again. He could notice the kindness of the people around him.

Looking up at the broad sky over Ubuyashiki mansion, Muichiro suddenly remembered a promise he’d made in the village of swordsmiths.



“Is that you, Lord Tokito? What are you doing here?” Kozo Kanamori ran up to Muichiro and peered at his bandages. “Are you sure you’re healed?”

“More or less,” Muichiro said. Well enough to pay a visit to the swordsmith village, anyway. “How’s the move coming along?”

“Just two more days and we’ll be finished. Women, children, and elders are moving to the new village first. My wife is already unpacking.”

Many villagers had been injured or killed in the attack by the Upper Rank Two

demon, but damage to the village as a whole had been kept to a minimum. The survivors had been able to begin evacuation to a new hidden site immediately.

“We’ve moved nearly all our tools and swords,” Kanamori continued from beneath his mask. “The last of them are being transported now. We’ll bury our dead here. Haganezuka ran ahead of everyone else and is already polishing blades in his new forge. Never mind, though. He’s not good for anything but swordsmithing, so if he stayed he’d only get in the way.”

Muichiro looked out at the skeleton of the old village. Before the attack, the clanking of hammers on iron could be heard from every corner. Now the houses and smithies stood empty. It was an achingly lonely scene.

“You’re not moving the graves to the new village?” he asked.

“No.” Kanamori’s voice caught, but he forced his tone to brighten. “We have to prioritize the living. And get back to making swords, of course. That’s what we do.”

Muichiro acknowledged this with a grunt.

“But what brings you here, Lord Tokito? Did you forget something?”

“I thought I’d visit Tetsuido’s grave.”

Kanamori started in surprise, then nodded eagerly. “Is that so? In that case, I’d be delighted to show you the way.”

Tetsuido was the swordsmith who had made Muichiro’s swords before Kanamori took over. He’d been more than just Muichiro’s smith; from the beginning, he’d shown personal concern for the young Demon Slayer. Muichiro hadn’t been able to appreciate this while Tetsuido was still alive. In fact, he’d barely even remembered the man’s name.

Which was exactly why he had to say a prayer at his grave before the village vanished.

“I also wanted to talk to Kotetsu,” he added. “But ...”

If the women and children had already moved to the new village, Kotetsu would have gone ahead with them.

“Oh?” Kanamori said. “If it’s Kotetsu you’re after, he’s still around.”

“He is?”

“Yes,” said Kanamori. He paused. “The truth is, there’s just the tiniest bit of trouble with young Kotetsu.”



Kanamori led Muichiro to Tetsuido’s grave. Muichiro offered flowers and a prayer before setting out to find Kotetsu.

“I know this place ...” Muichiro looked around. He’d found himself in the grove where he first met Kotetsu.

Beneath the ancient trees, Kotetsu sat abjectly in front of a clockwork automaton, the Yoriichi Type Zero. From the tools scattered around, Muichiro guessed that he was trying to repair it.

Kotetsu let out a deep sigh. Then he spotted Muichiro. “Tokito?” he cried. “What’s going on? Are you better already? But you were really hurt! You frothed at the mouth and passed out!”

“I slept for two days straight.”

“Whoa whoa whoa. You can’t sleep off those kind of injuries. It’s not like getting over a cold. For most people, anyway. Tokito, are you even human?” Kotetsu was as excitable as ever.

“Say,” Muichiro said casually, “why aren’t you at the new village?”

The boy deflated abruptly. His shoulders slumping, he muttered, “I can’t go. The Zero is still broken.”

“Sorry. Because of me?”

“No, of course not!” Kotetsu shook his head frantically. “I mean, when you knocked the arm off, I did wish your stupid seaweed head would explode. But...”

“But?” Muichiro looked down at the younger boy.

“It still had five arms left. But then, after I recalibrated it to take you down, Tanjiro used it for training.”

“What?” Muichiro was already lost. Kotetsu filled him in on the details.

Tanjiro had used the Zero as a sparring partner, starting with sticks rather than swords in the mechanical doll’s remaining hands. At first the training was a disaster, but after a week Tanjiro’s sword neared its mark. Still, Tanjiro hesitated to land a killing blow on the automaton. Friendly soul that he was, he didn’t want to damage Kotetsu’s beloved machine.

Muichiro nodded to himself. That sounded like the Tanjiro he knew.

“So I told him, swing—it’s okay if it breaks,” Kotetsu continued. “I said I could fix it.”

Urged on, Tanjiro had brought his sword down on the Yoriichi Type Zero at last.

“And then the Zero opened up and there was a katana inside,” the young swordsmith said. “Haganezuka polished it up.”

“What?” This story was more surprising by the minute.

With that blade, Tanjiro took the head of an Upper Rank Four demon. Heartened by the success of the training, Kotetsu decided to get back to his own work in earnest. Tanjiro had trusted him, and his sword had been sure.

However...

“I managed to screw the head and arms back in place, but that’s just the exterior.” Kotetsu shook his head wearily. “The clockwork inside...”

“The Zero’s not moving?” Muichiro asked.

“No, it moves. More or less. But it doesn’t function the way it used to, with all the attacks. No matter what I do, I can’t recreate its battle training forms. I’m useless.” Kotetsu hung his head again.

Muichiro gently touched the automaton’s arm and felt the solid chill of the wood against his palm. The way it had moved when he’d faced off against it in the past, he could almost have mistaken it for a human being with blood running through its veins. He could understand why Kotetsu was so dejected.

“Why don’t you take it with you to the new village and work on it there?”

Kotetsu shook his head. “Tecchin told me if I can’t get it back in shape by the last moving day, I ought to leave it behind. That’s just two days from now.” At the ends of his limp arms, his fists trembled.

Muichiro tried to understand Tecchin’s thinking. The Nichirin Swords were essential to the war against the demons, so the swordsmiths needed to focus on moving their village and returning to their work. If the automaton would compromise the speed and secrecy of the move, it would make sense to abandon it.

“We’re using special techniques to keep the demons from following us,” Kotetsu explained. “There’s a limit to how much we can bring.”

“Meaning you can’t take anything that doesn’t work?”

Kotetsu sagged. “Yes.” The sound of sniffing came from behind his mask.

Muichiro took his hand off the mechanical arm. The old Muichiro would have agreed wholeheartedly with the village chief. There was no point in saving useless things. Or useless people.

But now he found Tecchin’s pronouncement heartless. Kotetsu’s ancestors had built this clockwork automaton centuries ago, in the Warring States period. For Kotetsu, it was more than a machine. It was a memorial from his father, almost a member of the family.

“In that case,” said Muichiro, “you’ll just have to fix it.”

Kotetsu choked back another sob. “But I—”

“I remember the movements. Not all of them, of course.” Muichiro cut Kotetsu off. The younger boy looked up at him from beneath his mask. “Let’s fix the Yoriichi Type Zero together.”

“What are you saying, Tokito? This isn’t like you. Do you have a fever?” Kotetsu’s confusion bordered on impertinence, but Muichiro shrugged it off.

“I’ll reproduce the movements. You remember them,” he said. “Or write them down.”

“Huh? But...”

“We only have two days, so we’d better get to it.”

Kotetsu nodded, still uncertain. “Right!”

The broken mechanical doll watched them with empty eyes.



“The right-two move goes like this.”

“Okay...”

“Here, use right-one and cut in like this.”

“Like this?”

“No. Like this. Faster, sharper.”

There was no way Kotetsu could commit all of Muichiro’s detailed instructions to memory. His pencil raced earnestly across paper as Muichiro, stripped to his shirt sleeves, slowly demonstrated the basic forms used by the Yoriichi Type Zero. He’d taken off his jacket to give Kotetsu a good view of his arm motions. In battle, he preferred a loose-fitting uniform that obscured his movements.

At some point, red had begun to streak across the western sky, and fatigue was showing on Kotetsu’s face. When Muichiro suggested a break, the young smith was clearly relieved.

“Good idea! I’ll go get some water.” Kotetsu dashed off to the nearest stream and soon returned with a full bamboo pail. Muichiro leaned back against the trunk of a maple tree and took a sip of the freshly drawn water. It was cold and faintly sweet.

“You’re amazing, Tokito,” Kotetsu said, sitting down beside him.

Muichiro tilted his head skeptically. “Where’d that come from?”

“You only practiced with the Zero once, but you remember all its forms. Who else could do that?”

“Well...it’s not like I remember every last one.”

“Even so, it’s really something. Compared to that, I’m...” Kotetsu looked away and sighed. It was quite the weighty sigh for a boy of ten. “I mean, even with

you helping me, I don't know how much I can do."

"You're only ten," said Muichiro. "You've got a lot of growing up to do."

"It's not that!" Kotetsu's voice rose, then fell again. "I don't have a knack for making swords. And I'm not much of a mechanic either. I'm nothing. But you...you were blessed with talent from the day you were born. You could never understand how I feel." The small hands encircling the bamboo pail trembled.

Muichiro turned his gaze from the boy sitting next to him up to the leafy trees. "You know, when I was your age, I'd never even touched a sword."

"What?" Kotetsu looked up, surprised. "I figured you came from one of those famous demon-killing dynasties."

"Our dad was a woodcutter." Muichiro smiled at the nodding leaves. "Our parents died when we were ten. After that, it was just me and my brother. I couldn't even cook rice or use a knife. I was hopeless at chopping wood. Yuichiro lost his temper at me all the time. He'd say the 'm' in 'Muichiro' stood for 'moo' because I was like a stupid cow. Or that the 'm' was for 'moot.'"

Looking back, Muichiro saw that he'd been a sheltered boy, even spoiled. He'd resented Yuichiro's coldness, not understanding that his older twin was desperate to keep him safe.

"Yuichiro wasn't like me," he went on. "He could do anything."

Yuichiro was an adept cook. He could chop down trees. He could trap and dress game. And for all his cutting remarks and bouts of temper, he made Muichiro's favorite dish, daikon simmered in miso, whenever he could get his hands on the ingredients. Muichiro could still taste the comforting flavor of miso infusing the soft daikon.

"Was your brother also in the Demon Slayer Corps?" Kotetsu asked. "Was he a Hashira?"

"My brother died when we were eleven," Muichiro said shortly. "Killed by a demon."

"Oh ..."

“That’s why I became a Demon Slayer.”

“I’m so sorry, Tokito!”

Even through the mask, Muichiro could tell that Kotetsu’s face had paled. He turned to the boy with curiosity. “What are you apologizing for?”

“It’s just... I didn’t mean to bring up painful memories,” Kotetsu apologized.

“But it’s thanks to you and Tanjiro that I’m able to remember my brother at all.”

“Me and Tanjiro? What do you mean?”

Keeping the story as brief as he could, Muichiro explained that he’d nearly died fighting the demon that killed his brother. He’d lost his memory. “But I remember now,” he said. “You tried to save me even after you were stabbed in the gut. You tried to help me. And to protect the village and its swords.”

Tokito ... F-forget about me ... Help ... Haganezuka ... Protect ... the swords.

There’d been no ego in those words, only Kotetsu’s selfless courage. He was no fighter, only a child of the village, yet he was prepared to give up his life for the swords.

“Seeing how much you care about people, and talking to Tanjiro, made me remember something important,” Muichiro concluded.

“Tokito ...”

“Thank you.” He’d wanted to say that for a long time. “I’m glad I had the chance to thank you and Tetsuido.”

“No. I should be the one thanking you.” Kotetsu stood up on the spot and bowed. “Thank you, Tokito.”

“Why are you thanking me?” Muichiro asked. Before Kotetsu could answer, they heard a chipper voice call out to them.

“Kotetsu! We finally found you!” Mitsuri Kanroji came bounding over, a massive plate piled high with onigiri in her hands.

“Provisions?” said Muichiro.

Kotetsu was equally surprised. “Kanroji? What are you doing here?”

“And Muichiro too! I knew it!” Mitsuri beamed at them as she set the plate down with a heavy thunk. “Everybody at the village has been so good to us Slayers, I thought I oughta come help you move. I’m really strong, y’know! I can carry a ton of stuff. But when I got here the move was basically over, and I was wondering what I could do, and then I ran into Kanamori.”

Kanamori popped his head out from behind a tree and waved.

“Oh,” Muichiro said, comprehension dawning. “So that’s how you knew where I was.”

Kanamori’s mask bobbed up and down. “I may have mentioned that young Kotetsu was having trouble with his family’s automaton and that Lord Tokito was likely with him. And when she said she wanted to bring you a snack, I decided to assist.” He held up a large kettle in one hand and a stack of teacups in the other. “The finest gyokuro green tea.”

“There wasn’t much rice left in the village, so I could only make a little bit of onigiri,” said Mitsuri. “But I salted them nicely and filled them with yummy umeboshi.”

“*That’s* a little bit?” Kotetsu faltered before the mountain of onigiri.

“It is for her,” Muichiro muttered.

Mitsuri giggled, her cheeks flushing. “You two are real buddies now, huh? So cute!”

“Oh no,” Kotetsu protested. “The Hashira Tokito and I are—”

“Yeah. We’re friends,” Muichiro said.

Kotetsu looked at Muichiro in surprise. “Tokito?”

“I was wrong,” he told the swordsmith. “About what I said that time.”

Your time and a Hashira’s time have a completely different value. Swordsmiths can’t fight. They can’t save someone’s life. They only have the ability to make weapons.

Know your place in life and act accordingly. Because you aren’t a baby.

He had been ridiculously, shamefully arrogant. At the time, he hadn’t even

understood why Kotetsu got upset or why Tanjiro slapped his hand away. Tanjiro had told him he lacked consideration, and he'd been exactly right.

The swordsmiths are important and do crucial work! They're different from swordsmen but still have incredible skills. I mean, we couldn't do anything if we didn't have actual swords!

Swordsmen and swordsmiths need each other!

We're both part of the fight!

Even in the face of Tanjiro's rebuke, Muichiro had felt the whole incident was trivial. He hadn't taken a single word to heart. Back then, no emotion could reach him. He lived only to kill demons.

He'd been no better than a mechanical doll.

"I know I should've done it sooner," he said, "but I want to apologize to you. To all of you. I'm sorry." He bowed deeply.

Kotetsu's head fell and his shoulders shook.

"The swords you and Kanamori make have saved me, and Haganezuka's swords have saved Tanjiro," Muichiro continued. "Swordsmen and swordsmiths are fighting together. Tanjiro was exactly right."

The boy's Hyottoko mask had slipped, and droplets fell from its wooden chin. Kotetsu was silently crying.

"You've really grown up, Master Tokito," Kanamori said thoughtfully. Then he let out a sniffle. He didn't hesitate to remove his own mask and bare his thin, teary-eyed face. "How overjoyed Tetsuido would be if he could see you now!"

"But it's true!" Mitsuri had joined in with tears of her own, her face screwed up in a sob. She clutched her sword as if ready to kiss it. "Master Tecchin's katana have saved me so many times!"

"Kanamori? Kanroji?" Muichiro was taken aback by this outpouring of emotion. "Why are *you* crying?"

"Tokito," Kotetsu said, wiping the cheeks showing from beneath his mask, "will you help me some more after we finish this onigiri?"

“Of course,” said Muichiro. “We’ll do it together.” Kotetsu grinned through his tears.

“You can do it!” sobbed Mitsuri. “I’ll make you loads of snacks, so get in there and get to work!” She burst into another wail as she hugged Kotetsu and Muichiro tight.



“Okay, here we go,” Kotetsu said solemnly. He inserted the key into the back of the mechanical doll’s head. The automaton readied its swords and stepped forward.

The six katana shot out blindingly fast, one after the other. Muichiro deflected each one in turn. By the time the doll stopped, it was clear that it had regained the sure, flowing movements Muichiro remembered from the Yoriichi Type Zero.

It was the final evening. At the last minute, Kotetsu had finally repaired the automaton to his satisfaction. Mitsuri let out a sigh of relief.

Kotetsu turned to the assembled group and bowed. “That’s all it can do for now. I’ve only managed to recreate one form.”

Mitsuri applauded wildly. “It’s amazing, Kotetsu!”

Kanamori joined the applause. “And imagine, just a few days ago you were stumped. You’ve worked hard to get it functioning again.” He nodded with satisfaction. “It’s just as the chief said.”

“The chief?” Kotetsu frowned. “Master Tecchin?”

“Yes, young Kotetsu,” Kanamori said. “All that talk about abandoning the machine if you couldn’t repair it was a lie.”

“What?!” Kotetsu was stunned.

“A lie?” Mitsuri leapt to her feet. “Are you kidding?”

“Why?” said Kotetsu. “Why would he be so cruel?”

“What’s the meaning of this, Kanamori?” Muichiro’s voice was hard.

“Ah, well.” Kanamori scratched the back of his head apologetically. “You see...”

Kotetsu’s a good kid. Smart, dedicated. Levelheaded when it comes to making decisions, and he’s got a keen eye for analysis. But ...

“The chief thinks you need to push yourself more,” Kanamori explained.

The boy sets limits on himself, and that’s no good. He doesn’t know his own potential.

“So to give Kotetsu a push, he set up a fake deadline?” Muichiro asked.

“More or less.” Kanamori’s mask bobbed. “The chief felt if he put Kotetsu’s feet to the flames, so to speak, he’d surprise himself. I was sent to keep an eye on his progress.”

It took Kotetsu a moment to digest this. The village chief was personally concerned about his growth. “That’s what was going on in his head? I had no idea...”

“To be honest, I thought you’d give up,” Kanamori confessed. “I’m sorry. I underestimated you. You’ve done magnificently here.”

“No, you were right. I was whining about how hopeless things were when I’d barely started work. If Tokito hadn’t shown up to help me, I would’ve given up.” He turned to Muichiro. “I’m going to repair the Zero all the way. When I do, please come train with it again.” He bowed deeply, then added, “I’ll fine-tune it and add some forms to hit your weak points.”

Muichiro remembered something Kotetsu had said when he talked about Tanjiro training with the automaton. “Is that what you did before? You tuned it to defeat me?”

“Argh! I’m sorry!” Kotetsu shrank back. “I was so mad at you back then. I’m sorry for calling you a seaweed head, an emotionless jerk, an ugly shrimp, and everything else. I don’t feel that way now!”

Muichiro stared. “Those were all about me?”

“I’m sorry!”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t matter now.”

Kotetsu took Muichiro's hands. "You promise? You'll definitely come back?"

"I will."

Kotetsu's hands were hard, crisscrossed with old scars and new blisters. They were the hands of someone who fought to the limit every day. Muichiro's hands were the same.

"Send me a message when you've got all the forms working," Muichiro said.

"Okay."

"We can invite Tanjiro and Nezuko and Genya and everybody!" said Mitsuri. "And Kanamori and Master Tecchin! I'll bring the snacks."

This was an extremely Mitsuri sort of idea. Her endless cheer, even in the midst of battle, gave strength to those around her.

"And the rest of Tanjiro's friends too?" she added. "I'm sure they'd love it."

Imagining this get-together, Muichiro found himself smiling. The others looked shocked by his expression.

He didn't know when they would meet again. He'd made a fragile promise, with no guarantee, in the midst of a war against powerful demons. But it sparked a small, gentle light in his heart.

"It's a promise, Tokito!" Kotetsu said. He continued waving until Muichiro and Mitsuri passed far out of view.



"Tokito?" Himejima asked.

Muichiro said nothing. He gazed at the sky.

"Are you all right?"

Returning from his memory of the swordsmith village, Muichiro looked over at Himejima. "I'm all right," he replied. It was a response not only to what he had just been asked, but to the Stone Hashira's earlier question.

Himejima's colorless eyes stared at him intently.

“Really. I’m not empty anymore.”

He had friends to fight alongside him. He had a master worth risking his life to protect. His brother hadn’t shunned him; he’d loved him until the moment of his death. He’d told him that the “m” in Muichiro was for “mugen”—infinity.

No. That wasn’t quite right.

Now he understood that he’d never really been empty. He just hadn’t been able to see how full his life was.

Let’s fight together as Hashira! The warmth of the Flame Hashira’s hand hitting his shoulder.

Who will understand you? When I see the sword you used, I shed tears.

The kindness of the old swordsmith who worried about his well-being.

Muichiro wished he’d noticed these things sooner.

“Thank you, Himejima,” he said, with real feeling. In his heart, he bowed to Rengoku and Tetsuido, and to all the other people who had given him their love.

Perhaps he sensed the emotion in Muichiro’s voice, because Himejima abruptly smiled. “Forget it. I don’t think I need to worry after all.”

“All right.” Muichiro stood up. “See you at the next Hashira meeting.”

“Mm. Be in good health.”

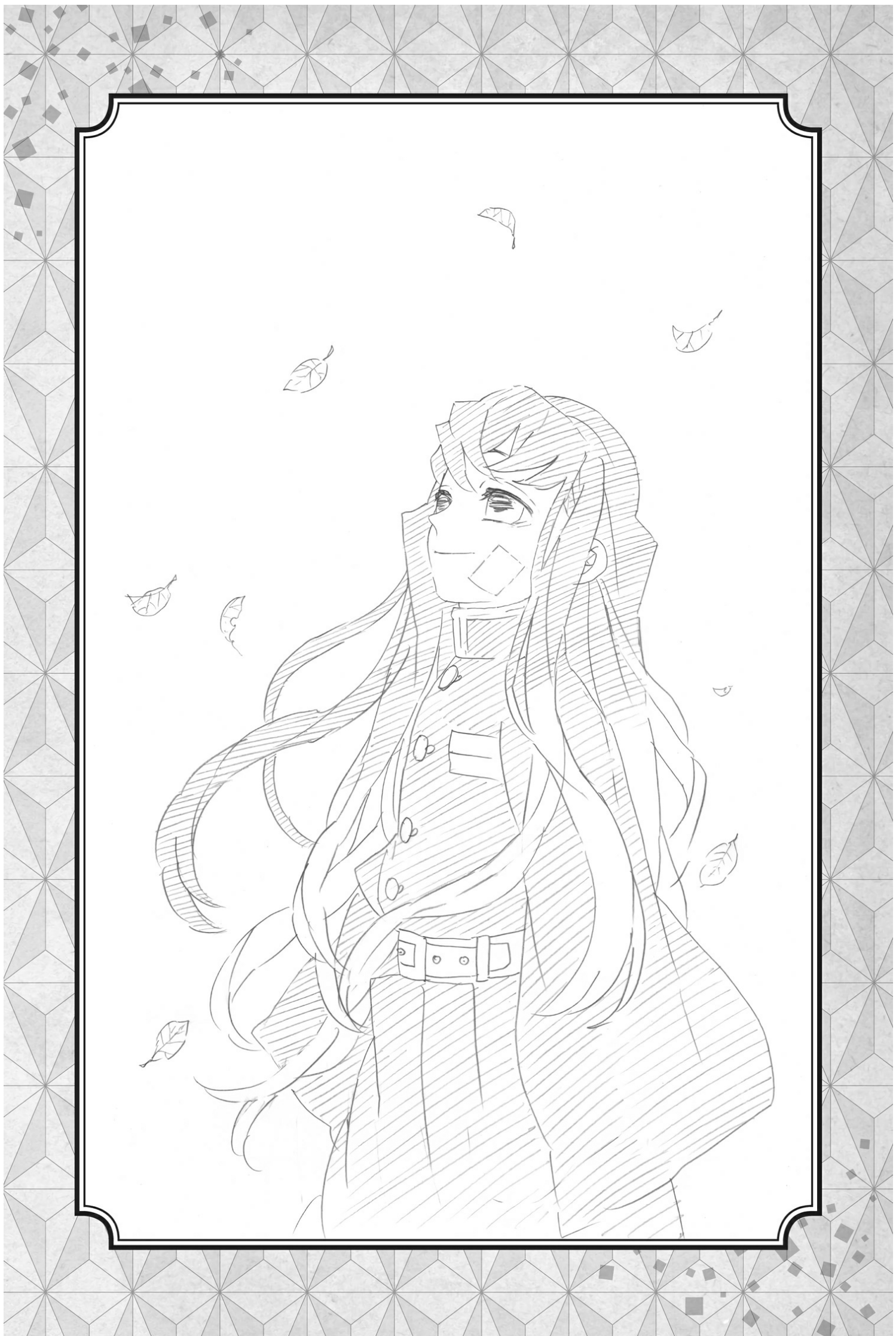
Muichiro bowed his head and left the gazebo. Narrowing his eyes at the wind that swirled around him, he looked up to the heavens. Clouds streamed by. The glimpses of sky between them were so blue they almost hurt his eyes.

Look at that, Yuichiro. Muichiro sent a silent prayer to his brother, who had left the world so young. Behind Yuichiro’s sharp tongue and cold gaze, there had been love, and the resolve to keep Muichiro safe. His brother had lived his short life fully.

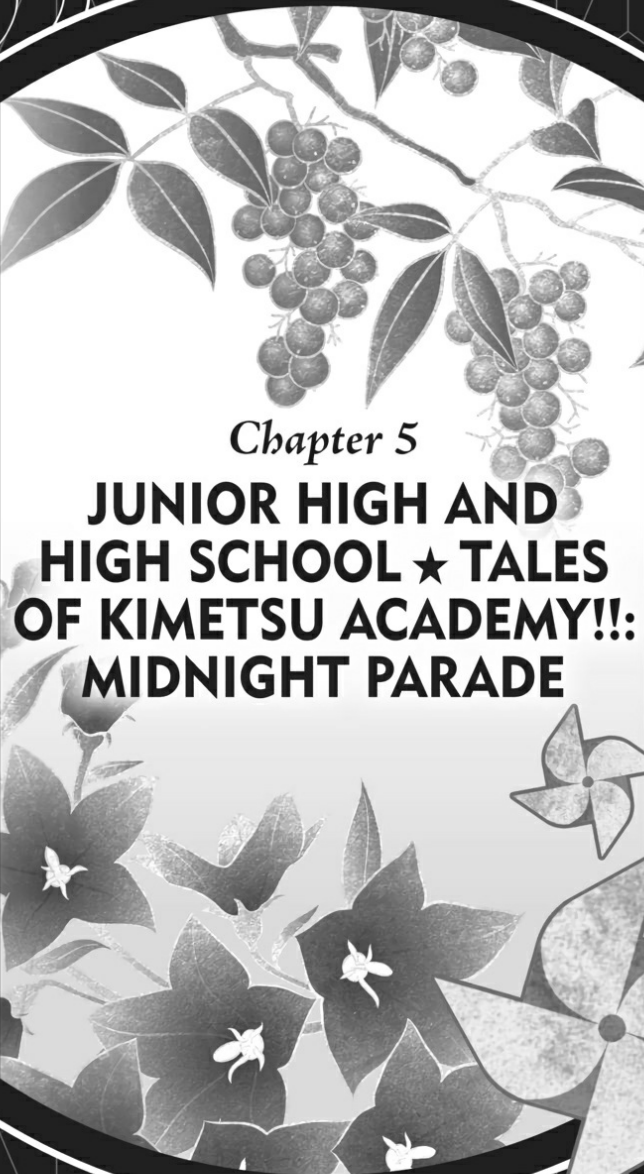
Muichiro didn’t know what the next day would bring. He might lose his life hunting demons. Even if he was fortunate enough to evade their fangs, he’d be gone by twenty-five.

Somehow, though, he wasn't afraid. As long as he lived in a way that would make his friends and family proud, when he got to the other side Yuichiro would greet him with a smile. "You did good, Muichiro," he'd say.

Across Muichiro's face flashed a smile as boundless as the blue sky.







Chapter 5

**JUNIOR HIGH AND
HIGH SCHOOL ★ TALES
OF KIMETSU ACADEMY!!:
MIDNIGHT PARADE**

“Let’s skip the annoying speeches. Cheers to Ms. Kanae!” Tengen Uzui cried. Glasses clinked together across the table. It was only Thursday, but the popular pub, about a ten-minute walk from Kimetsu Academy, was jammed with drunken customers.

“Thank you.” Kanae stood. “As many of you know, Kimetsu Academy is my own alma mater, so it’s exciting to start work here as a biology teacher. I’m still new at this, so I would very much appreciate your guidance.” She bowed.

Sighs of admiration rippled through the group. Kanae’s younger sisters, still students, were all popular with the boys, but in her own day she had been a legend. Adored by girls, boys, and everyone in between, she’d shone like a star. Her male students were sure to have trouble concentrating on their studies.

Uzui glanced around the table as he sipped his beer. It was no surprise that the male teachers were captivated by Kanae’s every movement, but the women seemed equally entranced. The other day, the morning assembly at which she’d been introduced had erupted in chaos. A certain member of the disciplinary committee had gotten a little too excited about welcoming her, and everyone cringed at the whimpering noises he made. One of the gym teachers had brought a fist down on his head, and two of his friends had dragged the unconscious committee member offstage.

And now this gang ...

History teacher Kyojuro Rengoku had polished off a few rounds and was shoveling sweet potato rice into his mouth with noisy relish. Math teacher Sanemi Shinazugawa was drinking beer like it was water and lecturing his younger brother over the phone about his poor grades. Uzui sympathized with the boy on the other end of the line, no doubt trembling on his knees. Gyomei Himejima, homeroom teacher to the first-year Takenoko Class, gazed at Kanae like a proud parent. He’d been teaching at Kimetsu since her student days and was clearly still protective. Gym teacher and disciplinary committee advisor Giyu Tomioka grabbed another handful of appetizers as he tilted his saké cup back. He was silent, but this didn’t necessarily mean he was in a bad mood. It was just that he couldn’t talk and eat at the same time.

Uzui rolled his eyes. None of them were exactly saints, but he could see why

they'd been assigned to Kanae's table. With all of them distracted in their own ways, though, it was left to Uzui to keep the conversation going.

Fortunately, Kanae was an ideal listener. No matter what he said, she reacted as if she were dying to hear more. But when Uzui brought up the ghost stories circulating among the students, the smile fell from her face.

"There's a haunted pot in the biology lab?" She cupped her chin in one hand. "And an old man who crawls down the hallway?"

"Don't tell me you're scared of ghost stories!" Uzui teased. Kanae smiled back.

"If anything, I rather enjoy them." Her expression grew serious again. "But if they're upsetting the students, it's my job as a teacher to deal with that."

"Exactly right, Ms. Kanae! I couldn't agree more!" Rengoku lifted his face from the sweet potato rice. An enthusiastic teacher, he was beloved by the student body and vocal about loving them right back. "If students are having problems, Kyojuro Rengoku can't sit back and let it happen!"

"Sure you can," Uzui told him. "Pipe down and eat your sweet potatoes, buddy."

But Rengoku was on a roll. "We should go immediately—tomorrow night at the latest—and patrol the haunted areas! Who's with me? Uzui?"

"Don't look at me. I'm not going anywhere."

"It's our duty to keep the peace at the academy!"

Uzui slumped forward wearily. When he got an idea in his head, Rengoku could be a real pain. While Uzui wrestled with the question of how to get his colleague to give up on the notion, Kanae raised her hand.

"If you don't mind, I'd love to tag along with you two," she said.

"Hey!" Uzui stared at her. "I didn't say I was going."

"Please. I know I can be helpful."

"I said I'm not going."

"Together we'll protect our students!" Rengoku agreed. "Right, Uzui?"

Uzui felt a headache coming on. His words were falling on deaf ears. Rengoku was always off in his own little world, but now it seemed like Kanae was joining him.

At any rate, with two pairs of hopeful eyes staring at him, he felt an itch deep under his skin. It wouldn't hurt to do a quick walk around, then talk them into going home. There was nothing to see, after all. After an hour or so wandering the empty school halls, Rengoku and Kanae were sure to give up.

"Fine," he sighed. "We'll meet in front of the school gates at eleven-thirty tomorrow night."

Rengoku and Kanae both beamed.

"Yeah!"

"Thank you."

After replying with a perfunctory "yeah, yeah," Uzui turned his gaze on Himejima, seated across from him. He wasn't expecting much of an outing, but it couldn't hurt to bring someone sensible along for the ride. "You're coming too, right, Himejima?"

"On the night watch?" Beneath his muscular exterior, Himejima was surprisingly soft-hearted. He looked up from his cup of hot saké, a tear trickling down his face. "I wish I could join you, but I'm out of town tomorrow, and I don't know what time I'll be back. Gotta say no this time. Sorry."

"Bad timing, huh? How about you, Shinazugawa?" Uzui shifted his gaze to Himejima's right.

Having just finished his call, Shinazugawa tucked away his phone. He scrutinized the group through his unruly hair. "Huh?"

Even at school, Shinazugawa refused to wear a tie and kept his collar wide open. The younger students burst into tears at his mere approach, and even older kids flinched at his voice and his intense stare. But he was kind to those who needed kindness, and generally only lost his temper when he had to deal with the ape Tomioka or when someone insulted his beloved mathematics. Still, he wouldn't button his shirt for anyone or anything, including weddings and funerals.

“I know you were on the phone, but you heard us, didn’t you?” Uzui said.
“We’re patrolling the school tomorrow night.”

“Nah, can’t do it.”

“What is it? A girl?”

“I’m not a horndog like you.” Shinazugawa snorted in annoyance. “Friday nights, Mom has overtime. She’ll be working late.” He’d be going to her workplace to pick her up, or else he’d be at home babysitting his younger siblings. Shinazugawa’s father had died when he was young, and his mother had sacrificed a lot to raise seven children on her own. Now that Shinazugawa was an adult himself, his heart and mind were focused on supporting her.

“You homebody,” Uzui teased.

“Shut up.” Shinazugawa turned away with a sneer, but everyone at the table looked at him warmly.

“That leaves Tomioka.” Uzui turned to his own right. “What do you say?”

Up to that point, Tomioka hadn’t spoken a word. He swallowed his appetizer.
“Uh...”

“If you don’t have plans, you’re coming with me,” Uzui said.

With a gut full of sake, Tomioka mumbled even less coherently than usual. Uzui gave up on the conversation.

A server brought plates piled with chicken wings, fried octopus, and salmon stewed with daikon. At the appearance of his favorite dish, Tomioka’s eyes glittered soberly.

“Come on. Let’s drink,” Uzui said, pouring saké into his colleague’s cup. Tomioka nodded and went back to drinking in silence.

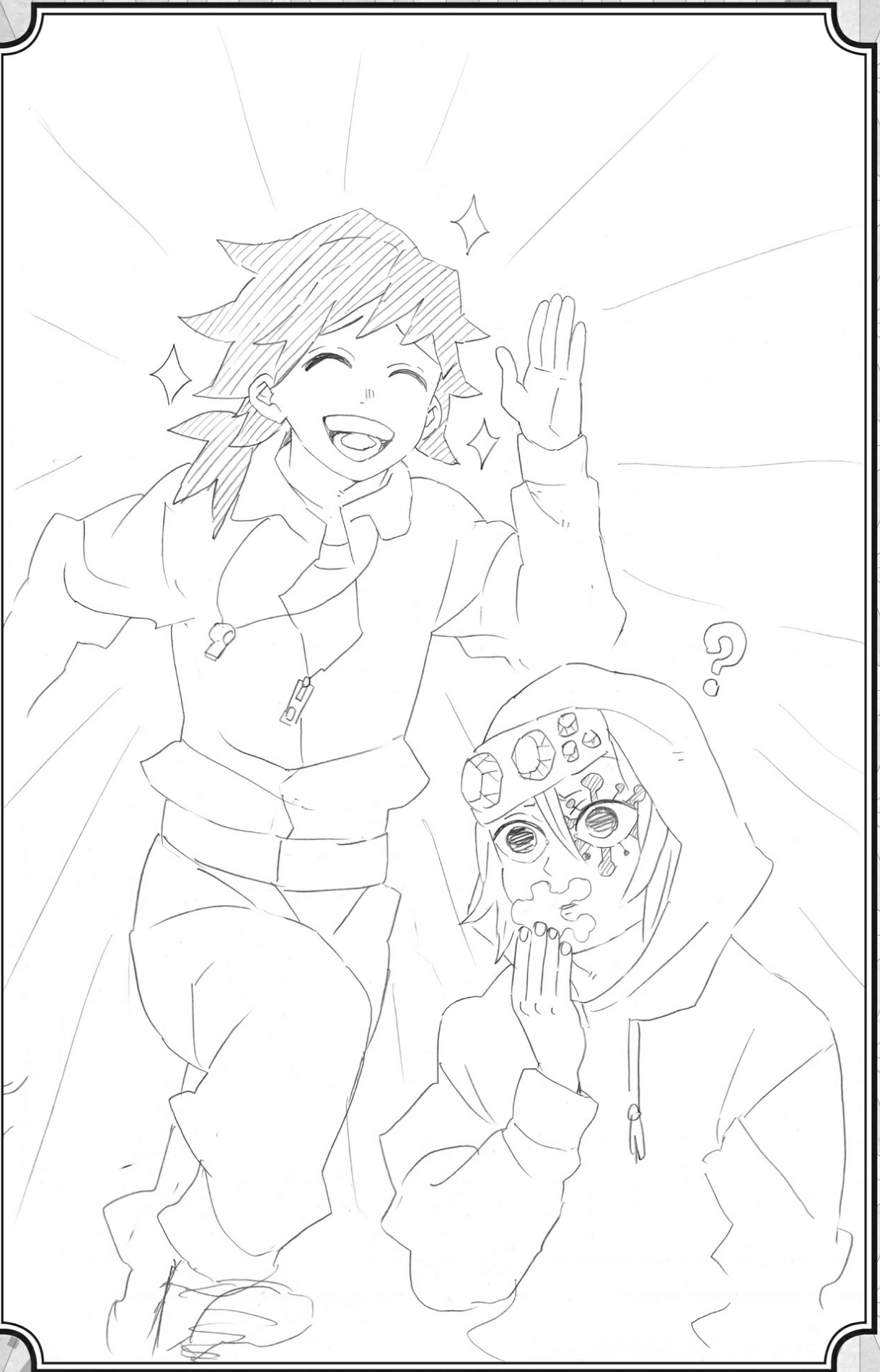
Kanae’s welcome party continued until well past midnight. The next morning, several of the teachers at Kimetsu Academy wobbled unsteadily at their podiums.

And then, at last, night fell.



“So cold! Feels like fall’s come early.” Uzui hunched over as the night wind blew over him. As far as he could tell, he was the first to arrive. The cold bit at him, but the previous night’s drinks still warmed his system. He was tired. Chomping on some gum to wake himself up, he fiddled with his phone.

“Hey, buddy!” Tomioka’s voice echoed down the deserted street. “Sorry I’m late!”



Uzui turned to the figure racing toward him. “What took ya so—” At the sight of the approaching teacher’s dazzling smile, the bubble he was blowing popped.

Tomioka skidded to a stop in front of Uzui and let out a sigh of relief. “The others haven’t made it yet, huh? Great! It’s cold for June, and I’d hate to make Kanae wait out here.”

Uzui stared in shock.

“Sorry, are you cold?” Tomioka asked. “If you want, I can lend you my sweater.”

Uzui shook himself. “Who are you?”

Tomioka blinked. “Um, Giyu Tomioka? From school?”

“Don’t give me that. The Tomioka I know is no ball of sunshine. He’s a loner, cranky as hell, barely says a word, no clue what he’s thinking—you get the idea.”

“Wow.” Tomioka winced. “Is that the way you see me, buddy?”

“You’ve never once called me ‘buddy.’” Uzui shivered. Goosebumps rose on his arms. This was giving him the creeps.

Now that he thought about it, there’d been some dubious mushrooms in that stewed salmon Tomioka had put away at the party. The restaurant had apologized, claiming they’d been added by mistake. Maybe they’d done a number on his colleague.

“Hey!” a voice called from behind him. “Am I late?”

“Nah, Rengoku. Perfect timing—” Uzui turned in the direction of the voice, but stopped short at the sight of the absurdly huge hiking backpack Rengoku wore on his back. “You ... do understand where we’re going, right? What’s with the kit?”

“Senjuro was worried about me,” Rengoku said. “He made me bring all the salt in the house to ward off evil spirits.”

“That whole thing’s filled with salt? How much salt do you have in your house, anyway?”

“Oh...unrefined salt, table salt, rock salt, the usual,” Rengoku said, opening the pack to show him. “Oh, and salted crackers.”

“What’re you going to do with crackers? Have a snack with the ghosts?” Uzui groaned. “And that chunk of rock salt is the size of a baby!”

“It really is. Where did you find something like that?” Tomioka peered into the pack, grinning. “Still, it’s awfully nice of Senjuro to think of his big brother. I just have an older sister, but I always thought it’d be fun to have little siblings.”

His cheery voice made Uzui shudder again. He put a hand on Rengoku’s shoulder. “Rengoku? Tomioka’s being weird.”

Rengoku looked baffled. “How so?”

“Still on that?” Tomioka made a show of being put out, goofing around like an ornery kid. “Tomioka’s the same as ever. You tell him, Rengoku, buddy.”

Uzui’s jaw dropped. *He’s talking about himself in the third person now?* He gestured helplessly at Rengoku.

But his colleague showed no sign of understanding. “Weird how?”

“How? Just...I mean...huh?” Uzui was at a loss for words. His friends looked mildly confused.

“You said Tomioka was being weird, right?” Rengoku said. “What did he do?”

A baffled grunt escaped through Uzui’s gritted teeth. This couldn’t seem normal to Rengoku, could it? The surly gym teacher suddenly turning cheerful and charming?

How is he weird? How is he not weird? Everything about this is uncanny.

Uzui wished Shinazugawa could have made it. Rengoku wasn’t the sharpest crayon in the box, but Shinazugawa would have understood the problem.

Or would he have? Maybe Uzui was the one who didn’t get it.

Do I really know what Tomioka is like?

Uzui started to doubt himself. Could he be sure he was seeing Tomioka as he really was? Who *was* Tomioka, anyway?

Tomioka... Tomioka... Tomioka...ka...ka...

Tomioka's name and face repeated in his mind until he felt ready to snap. Why did he even care? Why was he wasting so much mental energy thinking about Tomioka?

It's all in my head. Just my imagination.

In the nick of time, before Uzui could make a complete fool of himself, Kanae arrived. Together, the teachers slipped through the school gates and into the shadows of the building, so unfamiliar at night.

The night watch began.



"Man, it's dark," said Uzui, leading the way with his phone flashlight.

"It feels kind of wrong," said Rengoku, following with an actual flashlight.
"Exciting, like a childhood dare."

"Watch your step, Ms. Kanae."

"Thank you, Mr. Tomioka."

Kanae and Tomioka followed Uzui and Rengoku down the dark hallway.

"First we'll check out that pot in the biology lab," said Uzui.

No one seemed to know in which hallway the old man was supposed to appear. They decided they might as well start with the spirit whose location had been pinpointed.

Rengoku nodded. "An old man jumps out of the pot and crawls around the lab, right?"

Uzui rolled his eyes. "You're mixing the two stories up." Actually, Rengoku's version was even creepier.

As they walked, Uzui tried to untangle the stories he and the other teachers had collected from students. The spirit in the biology lab:

- had three mouths, one eye, and a large but unknown number of hands.
- subjected anyone it saw to endless taunting and insults.

- tickled (with all its hands) anyone who refused to listen to its incomprehensible boasting.

- was definitely single (this tidbit came from an oddball student with a passion for automata).

- was very proud of its pot. If anyone pointed out flaws in its workmanship, it became enraged and exploded into curses.

- fancied itself an artist and laughed smugly.

And the ghost in the hallway:

- crawled around the school weeping.

- muttered resentfully.

- appeared at first glance to be an old man in a kimono but, on closer inspection, had two horns on its head and did not appear entirely human.

- attacked smaller students and stole their belongings.

- had a prominent bump on its head from an axe kick Tokito gave it when it tried to attack him in junior high.

Uzui sighed. “When I say it out loud, it sounds like a whole lot of nothing.”

The teasing, the tickling, the stealing—all perfectly ordinary human behavior. Except for the spirits’ supposedly eerie appearances, both stories were basically descriptions of common school aggravations. On top of that, apparently the crawling guy could be beaten up by a junior high kid. As he continued down the hall, Uzui began to feel deflated, not that he’d ever been enthusiastic about this expedition.

In contrast ...

“This has to end!” Rengoku burned with righteous indignation. “How dare these manifestations harass our students?”

“Sure, of course, but—”

“I won’t let anything hurt them! I don’t care what it is! Kyojuro Rengoku will dish out justice!”

As if in response to this declaration, a grating sound drifted from the darkness

ahead of them.

Zssh zsh zsh ... Zssh zsh zsh ...

Something was crawling down the hallway. And weeping.

“Why?” a hoarse voice sighed. “Why must they persecute me? I never wronged them ... Why ... ?”

On and on the voice droned. “It’s not my fault ... I didn’t do anything ... They’re the ones in the wrong ... Why does everyone pick on me? Aaah ... Hateful, so hateful ... The world is full of bullies who torment the weak ...”

Uzui stopped and turned his phone toward the voice. The sulky muttering gave way to a shriek.

In the pool of light, an old man with cracked skin shuddered dramatically. Clad in an ancient kimono, he seemed human at first glance, but two horns protruded from his head. On his forehead, between the horns, was a large bump, as if from a kick.

Uzui was gobsmacked. The thing was real.

Uzui had assumed the ghost stories were nonsense made up by students trying to scare each other. But here he was, staring down at one of the ghosts. He had no idea what to do. If it had been a human intruder, he wouldn’t have hesitated to slug it. But he wasn’t sure a fist would settle things with a monster.

“Rengoku!” he shouted. “Your salt! Throw salt on it!”

“Huh? Throw it where?” Rengoku wandered past the monster without so much as a pause.

Uzui’s eyes almost popped out of his head. Was Rengoku so scared he was pretending not to see the creature? No, he was the last person who would do that. They’d known each other since their school days, and Uzui had never seen Rengoku shrink from anything. Besides, he’d just been ranting about doing whatever it took to protect his students.

Why would he ignore the monster crawling down the hallway? What kind of strategy was that?

Shaking off his bafflement, Uzui remembered that Kanae was still behind him.

Surely she was terrified by this hair-raising apparition. “Kanae, are you all right?” He turned. “If you’re scared, you can close your eyes and hang on to me —”

The beautiful biology teacher passed him coolly to face the old man. In a clear voice, she chanted, “*Rin. Pyo. To. Sha. Kai.*” She pulled paper charms from her jacket and tossed them at the apparition.

The moment the first charm touched the lump on his head, the old man’s body was engulfed in flames. He screamed in pain and rage. Before Uzui’s eyes, the creature’s flesh burned away. Even the ashes left behind faded into nothingness.

Silence fell in the hallway.

“Wha—” Uzui tried to comprehend what he’d just seen.

Kanae smiled sweetly at him. “We’re all right now.”

“Eep!” It wasn’t Uzui who let out the squeak of a cry, but Tomioka. He backed away from Kanae, trembling.

Kanae strode off. “We’d better keep going.”

Uzui couldn’t stop himself from calling out to her. “What was that just now?”

“What do you mean?” She looked back at him with the smile of an angel, but her voice and bearing warned him not to press her. Uzui swallowed the rest of his questions. In his experience, a woman would open up in her own time.

“What’s taking you guys so long? Let’s get to the biology lab!” Rengoku had finally noticed that the others were far behind him. He waved from the far end of the hallway, still acting like nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Still puzzled, Uzui followed his colleague to the biology lab.

Tomioka trotted along behind Uzui. He kept glancing nervously around, maintaining a fixed distance from Kanae. He was practically clutching Uzui’s arm. Uzui didn’t blame him for being shaken, but it seemed like too much. Since when was Tomioka such a coward? Uzui shut down that line of thinking. Any preconceptions about what Tomioka was like had gone out the window at the beginning of the evening.

He felt a strange chill. His body was suddenly so heavy he could hardly keep walking.

We'll finish this up and grab some ramen or something, he told himself, trying to pick up the pace.



When they reached the biology lab, Uzui looked back at Kanae.

“Have you seen the pot the ghost is supposed to come from?”

“No, nothing like it.”

Uzui was struck by the strange wistfulness in her voice. It seemed odd that, as the new biology teacher, she hadn't familiarized herself with everything in the lab. Maybe the pot only appeared at certain times.

“Does it move?” he asked, more to himself than to anyone around him. “The pot, I mean. Is that possible?”

“It's pitch black in here,” said Kanae. “Everyone please watch your step.”

Tomioaka let out another squeak.

With the blackout curtains closed, the room was indeed dark, much darker than the hallway. Even so, they had no trouble finding the haunted pot. A monstrous, misshapen specter hovered over it like a genie from a lamp. Even Uzui, who taught modern art, had never seen anything so surreal.

“Well, well, well,” burbled the creature. “If it isn't some idiot teachers! What business do you have with Gyokko, king of pots? Hyo hyo!”

Perhaps this self-proclaimed king was bored, because the spirit seemed almost pleased to see the teachers. It looked them up and down as if assessing their worth. “Hmph. Nothing but a gaggle of monkeys. No aesthetic sense whatsoever. But I suppose I can work with that.”

Uzui scowled. “It's even mouthier and grosser than the rumors said.”

“What?” said Rengoku. “Do you see the pot monster? Where?”

“What do you mean?” Uzui said. “It’s right in front of us.”

“Where?” A huge chunk of rock salt in hand, Rengoku stared in exactly the opposite direction. “The curtains? Is it hiding behind the blackout curtains?”

“I’m telling you, it’s right in front of us. What’s up with you tonight?”

Kanae leaned over to whisper in his ear. “Uzui. Rengoku can’t see the spirit.”

“Huh?” Uzui turned to look at her. “But it’s plain as day.”

“Some people are like that. Either they’re too filled with strong positive energy to be affected by evil auras, or they’re...er...” She grimaced apologetically. “A bit thick.”

Positive, energetic, and not too bright. It was like the description was tailor-made for their colleague.

Uzui recalled Rengoku’s earlier incomprehensible behavior, and the crease on his brow smoothed away. “So he couldn’t see the old man either?”

“I don’t think so. Or hear him.”

As they talked, Rengoku was still whirling around, earnestly looking for the creature that threatened his students. “Quit hiding and show yourself! Come out and fight with your head held high!”

“There’s a real musclehead, eh? Poor dimwit can’t even appreciate my beautiful visage. How dense is this fellow?” Gyokko laughed gratingly.

“To the right of the blackboard, Rengoku,” Uzui snapped. “By the water tank.”

“Got it!” With a confident nod, Rengoku raised the chunk of rock salt over his head.

The rock salt slammed into the blackboard with a crash. A cry of “Hyo!” escaped from the specter’s three mouths in unison.

“Well, Uzui? Did I get it?”

Unfortunately, the massive hunk of salt had missed Gyokko by mere centimeters. But the creature paled and fled back into its pot. As if waiting for this, Kanae slapped a paper charm over the mouth of the pot.

“That was perfect,” she said, clapping her hands prettily. “Thanks to you, Mr.

Rengoku, the students will no longer be subjected to condescension, showered in verbal abuse, or tickled.”

“Really? Great!” Rengoku laughed.

Uzui stared at Rengoku with new eyes. The guy had defeated a monster with pure physical force, and he didn’t even know it.

“What’s wrong, Uzui?”

“Nothing.” He forced his gaze away from Rengoku to meet the eyes of Tomioka, whose face was as white as paper. Uzui swallowed in surprise at his colleague’s obvious terror. “You okay, Tomioka?”

“I-I’m fine, Uzui. Um...Rengoku’s just really something, is all. Who knew?” Tomioka forced a laugh, but his eyes weren’t smiling. Sweat poured down his face.

“Next we get the monster crawling around the hallway!” Rengoku dashed from the classroom, ready to strike while the iron was hot. He didn’t know that Kanae had already exorcised the old man. Uzui was about to follow him and explain when he heard Rengoku shout, “Found it! Upstairs!”

“Huh? Kanae already got that one...” Uzui peered into the hallway just in time to see Rengoku leaping up the staircase six steps at a time. “Rengoku! Kanae already took care of that guy!”

Uzui looked over his shoulder at Kanae, seeking her agreement. There was a troubled look on her face. “I did hear something upstairs,” she said.

Tmp tmp. Uzui heard it too. The sound of heavy footsteps.

“It might be a burglar,” said Kanae.

Uzui shook his head. “Would a burglar be stupid enough to stomp around like that?”

Anyway, this was a school. There was almost nothing of monetary value. Which wasn’t to say it was impossible. Just the other day, he’d heard about a high school that upgraded its computers to the latest model and immediately had them stolen, plugs ripped out of the wall.

Still not sure what was going on, Uzu followed Rengoku up the stairs. At the

top, he stopped in surprise. “You guys? What’re you doing here?”

Tanjiro Kamado, Zenitsu Agatsuma, and Inosuke Hashibira stared back. All three were members of the band Uzui led, Seedy Style Democracy.



“You’re telling us you’re not here out of idle curiosity? You came to bust the ghosts yourselves?”

“That’s right,” said Tanjiro. Normally one of the most responsible senior students, the boy looked crestfallen. “I had to do something. My little sister’s friends are all scared.”

The other boys jumped in to explain that they’d eagerly offered to lend their friend a hand.

“I’m not scared of ghosts! I’ll kick their butts!” Inosuke thrust his chest out and snorted. “I’m the boss, after all. Can’t let my minions go into danger alone.”

It seemed they both meant well, at least. Rengoku turned to the last member of the group, whose face stiffened.

“My only desire is to keep the peace of the academy,” he said.

“Yeah, yeah.” Uzui waved a dismissive hand. “Why’d you really do it?”

“What do you think?” Zenitsu’s eyes burned with excitement. “If I get a rep as a monster hunter, all the girls’ll be hot for me! Next year, I’ll be swimming in Valentine’s chocolate!” The words rattled out all at once, as if he couldn’t stop himself. With a gasp, he shut his mouth like a trap.

Uzui snorted a laugh. “I figured you, at least, had less than pure intentions.”

“That was total entrapment!” Zenitsu cried. “A forced illegal confession! How dare you?”

“You told on yourself, dummy.” Uzui turned away in annoyance. “Well? What should we do with them?”

Rengoku looked at the three boys thoughtfully. Tanjiro was shrinking into himself with embarrassment, Inosuke was throwing his head back proudly, and

Zenitsu was cradling his blond head, startling even in the dark, moaning, “No ... No ...”

“Even setting aside the, um, less admirable motives, it’s good that you’re thinking about your school and fellow students.” Rengoku put on his sternest face. “But we still can’t allow you to sneak in here at night on your own.”

“We’re not on our own,” Inosuke argued, digging around in his ear.

“Oh?” Uzui glared at Inosuke.

Tanjiro stepped forward to support his friend. “He’s right! We wouldn’t break into the school without permission. We asked Mr. Tomioka and he offered to come with us. He’s in the restroom right now.”

Uzui barked out a laugh. Zenitsu was a bit of a sneak, but he was surprised that Inosuke and Tanjiro would lie to him. They didn’t have the guts for it. “Whoa, there. Don’t make up stories. Mr. Tomioka has been with us all night.” He looked back, but no one was there. “Tomioka?”

Was he still downstairs? He must really be scared. Uzui was about to check the stairwell when he heard a surly voice.

“You called?” Giyu Tomioka stepped out of the nearby men’s room.

Uzui frowned. “You really were in the can?”

“Yeah. What of it?”

“Wait, whoa, hold up.” Uzui waved his hands in front of him. “How’d you get up here ahead of us? You’ve been with us the whole time.”

“Like hell I have.”

“No, we met in front of the school gates at eleven-thirty. Remember?”

Uzui looked to Rengoku for help. Frowning in confusion, Rengoku said, “What are you talking about, Uzui? Tomioka said he had other plans tonight.”

“Huh?” Uzui’s jaw dropped.

“You didn’t say you were coming here with some students instead. You should’ve just told us, Tomioka. Why the cold shoulder?”

Tomioka grunted. “I wasn’t paying attention to your jabber. That stewed

salmon really hit the spot.”

The flat affect. The few words. The eyes that hid what he was thinking. That mask-like face. No doubt about it: this was Giyu Tomioka.

So who had he been patrolling with?

“Man, you’ve been out of it today, Uzui,” Rengoku was saying. “Talking to yourself, complaining about Tomioka when he wasn’t even there...”

Talking to myself? He wasn’t there?

“You’re looking pale. Do you have a cold or something? Don’t you think he looks sick, Tomioka?”

“Yeah, I guess,” said Tomioka.

Now that I’m thinking about it ...

The whole time they’d been patrolling, Rengoku had never spoken to Tomioka. He hadn’t even called his name.

According to Kanae, Rengoku couldn’t see or hear supernatural entities.

But that means...

“Sorry, Uzui,” Kanae said. “I thought it was a harmless copycat spirit, so I decided to let it be for a little while. But it turned out to be an evil spirit that targets men with girlfriends. It copies the face of someone close to its victim, then drains his life force.” Her face blossomed into a smile. “But I just exorcised it, so no worries!”

Uzui caught a glimpse of his own face reflected in a window. His skin was ashen, his cheeks were hollow, and his eyes stared out from black pits.

Suddenly dizzy, he passed out.



Tengen Uzui slept for two full days.

He recovered with the devoted care of his three girlfriends, but the students and staff whispered that the devil had taken him. Rengoku and Tomioka

worried about his strange behavior during the ghost hunt, and Kanae quietly handed him a paper charm against evil.

Zenitsu, the only one of the midnight invaders to be punished, was made to write an essay on good intentions. A month later, determined to get his Valentine's chocolates, he dragged Tanjiro along on another secret mission. But that's a story for another time.

To this day, a chunk of rock salt is embedded in the blackboard in the biology lab. A new rumor has started that it's a talisman of positive energy.

At any rate, Kimetsu Academy is once more at peace, in its own way.

Sparkle
shine
ring!

Ding
ding
dong!

Am I the
only one bad
at flying?



Afterword
KOYOHARU GOTOUGE

Hello! Gotouge here.

Yajima wrote a third novel! I'm so grateful! As usual, I made some mistakes in the illustrations, but all the shinobi of the Village of Editors saved me with their techniques for dispelling tiresome errors.

It seems a lot of kids are reading the *Demon Slayer* novels, and I'm delighted. They might be a little challenging for young readers, but knowing all those words will be useful when you need to express your feelings. Words have the power to bring the universe to your feet. Please be sure to read both manga and prose so you get a balanced diet of language.

Afterword
AYA YAJIMA

Just as I was in the middle of writing this afterword, the final chapter of *Demon Slayer* came out in *Shonen Jump* magazine. I read all 205 chapters, each and every week, entranced like a child.

Koyoharu Gotouge, thank you for all your hard work. In the midst of this hugely popular series, during days so hectic the average person can't imagine it, you made time to supervise these novels. For each volume, you drew covers that made my heart skip a beat and all kinds of wonderful interior illustrations. Some made me laugh, others cry, and some bewitched me. Every time I received another piece of your art, I was beside myself with glee and appreciation.

From the very bottom of my heart, I love your illustrations, story, characters, dialogue, and even the scent coming from your work.

My editor Nakamoto came through for me in a big way once again. I'm sorry for being unsure of myself and worrying about everything. I have nothing but gratitude. You're always a sturdy support beam when we work together.

And thanks to everyone in the j-Books editorial department, the place I secretly think of as my heart's home. Thanks to *Shonen Jump* editor Asai, who fact-checked the details for me; Shiotani and Sato from Naht, who were in charge of proofreading; all the many people who were involved with publishing this book; and the countless people who supported me both in public and behind the scenes. And finally, to each and every reader who picked this book

up, I send you my heartfelt gratitude.